



*A Splendidly*  
(UN)SUITABLE  
*Match*  
A PRIDE & PREJUDICE VARIATION  
*Jennifer Joy*

# A Splendidly (Un)suitable Match

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

Jennifer Joy

A Splendidly (Un)suitable Match: A Pride & Prejudice Variation  
Love's Little Helpers, Book 1

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# Free Book

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# Chapter 1

Darcy brushed the sweat trickling down his cheek, the folded messages sliding against the lining in his waistcoat pocket propelling him to Matlock House.

It was a rare occurrence for Darcy to receive correspondence from his relatives when they lived walking distance from his own residence. They preferred simply to call.

One note on any day was unusual. Two notes on the same day was disconcerting. To receive one from his aunt, followed by another summons a quarter of an hour later from his uncle, was alarming.

Picking up his pace, Darcy ran down the damp sidewalk, his boots slapping against the wet pavement and marring their polish.

A long string of grand houses lined one side of the street facing the park, the grass vibrant green against the dull gray sky. His uncle's house was on the corner, five bays wide, the whitewashed stucco overwhelmed by the gloomy weather threatening to break yet again.

The first drops pelted against Darcy's hat just as he reached the bottom step.

The butler flung open the painted black door, taking Darcy's hat and gloves. "His Lordship is expecting you, sir." Despite Perkins' decades of experience repressing emotion into a tone of bland indifference, Darcy heard his relief and felt it with the efficiency with which the butler relieved him of his damp hat and greatcoat.

Apprehension rippled through Darcy. The situation must be dreadful if the servants were uneasy.

A shadow fell over the marble from behind him, and the squeak of wet boots slipping on the slick floor and the subsequent, "Thunder 'an turf!" identified the newcomer before Darcy turned to see Charles Bingley, arms flailing to catch his balance.

"You got the summons as well?" No sooner had Bingley uttered his question than the obvious answer struck him. He grimaced. "Of course you did. The colonel must be in a proper fit of the blue devils."

Darcy grimaced. He had warned Richard, but his cousin had refused to listen. And now, here they were....

Bingley babbled, betraying his nerves with senseless chatter. "I am horribly ill-equipped to be of any help. Really, I have no experience when too often I am the one in the suds and in need of your and the colonel's counsel to bail me out. But if Lord and Lady Matlock consider my presence necessary, I will do what is within my power to do. However little that may prove to be. Not that I am completely useless." He shoved his hands through his hair. "But — dash it all, Darcy — I had hoped to be celebrating with the colonel. Not this."

Far from senseless, Bingley had hit the mark squarely on the nose, and Darcy was reminded to give his younger friend more credit. Bingley had matured a great deal since those simpler days when he, Richard, and Darcy spent their summers away from Eton between Matlock and Pemberley. Richard, being the oldest, had been in his final year, whereas Bingley was in his first — the son of a man who had made his fortune manufacturing cotton in the North, shorter and skinnier than the other boys, and possessing the unfortunate tendency to blush at the slightest provocation. While the importance of choosing one's associates meticulously had been ingrained into Darcy since birth, his sense of justice did not allow for him to turn a blind eye to his peers' bullying of the newcomer. He had been quick to agree when Richard suggested that they extend Bingley their protection and friendship, elevating him to acceptability through their association.

Quick to draw right conclusions. Quick to act. That was Richard. It felt odd to be here for his sake. He should have been able to see what had been painfully evident to Darcy.

Aunt Helen descended the stairs, her lips thin and her eyes strained. "Thank you for coming, boys." The tenderness with which she addressed them made Darcy feel like a stripling.

He took her hands in his. "How is he?"

Her lips disappeared completely. "As well as a gentleman in his place would be. It is your uncle's wish, as well as mine, that you both exercise some influence over him. Especially you, Bingley."

Bingley's jaw dropped. "M-me? I mean, if you are certain — It is only that — Are you sure you mean *me*?"

She patted his arm. "It is not my custom to misspeak."

He colored. "Of course not. It is only that I cannot recollect any



occasion in which anyone at all has sought the benefit of my advice. Not one."

With the overbearing sisters Bingley had, Darcy was not surprised. It was amazing he had managed to form any opinions of his own at all without one of them harping on him to change it.

Lowering her voice, Aunt said, "I hope you will not take offense, but I was under the impression that you have suffered more than one heartbreak and, therefore, are in an excellent position to help my Richard."

Bingley brightened considerably, his chest puffed in pride. "If I am an expert in anything, it is in falling in and out of love."

Calf love, Darcy considered. He gladly yielded to Bingley's expertise. Darcy would not give his heart until he was certain the lady not only suited him perfectly but also returned his affection (based on his own merits and not those which his wealth, position, and connections would guarantee her).

"Precisely," said Aunt, holding her hands out for them to take and walking up the stairs like a queen between her bodyguards. "I am convinced that Richard's attachment was more fanciful than genuine — you know how impulsive he can be — and I am counting on you boys to convince him not to waste any more time on a coquette beneath his touch."

The coquette, in this instance, was Miss Arabella Honeyfield, the beauty of the season with a string of beaux vying for her hand. There was a reason she remained unmarried, but Richard would not hear anything against her. Affection had muddled his brain, eclipsed his sense. Darcy's warning had ended in a quarrel, and even now that his point had been irrevocably proved, he took no delight in it. Richard was too good a man to fall for a flighty, senseless miss. Better to cry a thousand tears now than weep one's regret for a lifetime.

They passed Uncle Matlock's study — where the best brandy and whiskey in the house could be found.

His aunt must be taking them to the billiard room. Darcy took a deep breath, preparing himself for the stench of cigar smoke and the unsightly clutter of empty bottles, decanters, and glasses.

Aunt Helen breezed by the billiard room without so much as a glance.

Darcy sucked in a breath. Was Richard so foxed he could not find his way out of bed? Added to the image of whiskey-rimmed

tumblers staining tables were untouched trays of food in a dark, stuffy room. He took another deep breath as they neared Richard's bedchamber door.

But Aunt Helen passed it by without a pause.

Where was she taking them?

Bingley caught Darcy's glance, eyes wide with uncertainty. Darcy could only shrug.

Finally, Aunt Helen stopped in front of the library. It was the last room in which Darcy would have suspected his cousin to seek solace. Richard was more of a man of action than of books. And yet, that was the door before which they stood. Gripping her hand around the knob, Aunt said, "He has not left this room in five days," then pushed open the oak barrier.

No bottles. No decanters. No glasses. Not so much as a tea tray was visible. Only a leather wingback chair surrounded by tables toppling with towers of tomes. And in the middle sat Richard — neck deep in books.

## Chapter 2

"Goodness me," Bingley whispered in a hushed library voice.

Darcy was equally astonished. He tilted his head to the side to read the titles — philosophy and military strategy padded with pamphlets of sermons and narrow tomes on etiquette. Themes much too diverse to tell him anything.

He pondered his cousin's appearance. There was a wildness to Richard's hair and unclipped whiskers, but he did not appear unhinged.

Aunt Helen touched Darcy's shoulder. "I will be in my sitting room if you need me." Her eyes remained trained on her second son, her soft singsong the same tone Darcy used to calm a riled dog.

At the sound of his mother's voice, Richard looked up. Dark circles rimmed his red eyes. Bingley, too, gasped at the shadow of a man before them. One glance, and Darcy understood his aunt and uncle's urgency.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam had always been a model of vitality and exuberance, as quick to stand up in a fight as he was quick to laugh, the first to adapt and advance. He was a favorite at the dinner table, his conversation lively and emotive. A man highly respected by his subordinates in the army — certainly not the sort to lose all sense of his surroundings or allow for anyone to sneak up on him lest he wanted a pistol trained on his person. Darcy did not know this disheveled book enthusiast hiding behind walls of theories, manners, and stratagems.

Stepping forward cautiously, Darcy spoke as softly as his aunt had. "Good afternoon, Rich." What did a person say to a man undone? "I trust you are in good health?" He pinched his lips closed before he could utter anything else so stupid.

Richard snapped the book in his hands closed, jabbing the cover with his thick finger, his cheeks feverish and his words rushed. "It is all here, Darcy. All the wisdom of the world distilled through the centuries from the greatest minds of the past."

Bingley stepped closer, curiosity getting the better of him. "Have you found the secret of happiness? The purpose of life? The key to

understanding women? Or how to best Darcy at a game of poker?"

A sly smile gave Darcy a promising glimpse of his steady cousin. "Until you learn to master your emotions as he has done, you would do well not to waste your time in that endeavor, Bingley. And, no, I found no such other treasures of wisdom, however I found the next best thing — a slip of paper with our dearly-departed-and-sorely-missed Cook's recipe for plum cake."

Darcy's gaze roved over every surface for a glimpse of that slip of paper. His aunt's Cook's plum cake was as great a source of happiness as anything else Darcy had experienced in his lifetime.

"I can only imagine an under-cook copied it and hid it in one of the pamphlets to retrieve later," Richard added, stretching his legs out in front of him. "You know how closely Cook guarded her receipts."

Darcy did. In the fifteen years since her passing, he had yet to sample her cake's equal. And he had sampled many.

Shaking his head at himself, Darcy pulled his attention away from the promise of plum cake and turned it back to the grieving cousin he was supposed to recall to his senses.

Bingley rubbed his chin. "I remember the cake well and declare that one slice would fill me with enough contentment to last the rest of my life. A man would be happy with a woman who could bake like her."

Darcy considered that Bingley was altogether too easy to please. Left to his own devices, he would engage Richard in a discussion of food, avoiding the issue for which they were summoned to Matlock House and making their stomachs miserable with hunger.

He motioned to the buttress of books surrounding Richard. "I see you are deepening your intellect. Have you found any information of use?"

Richard shoved his fingers through his hair, the feverish expression heightening the color in his cheeks. "You strictly adhere to the strictures with which we were raised, Darcy. *Your* judgment has been impeccable, and while I have always wished you would relax and enjoy the advantages you have been born into, I now understand why you are the way you are ... especially in new society."

Darcy raised his eyebrows, intrigued at his cousin's newly gained insight.

Bingley scratched his head. "Taciturn?" He startled, coloring as

he realized he had spoken his thought aloud, and added hastily, "Not with us, mind you. Merely, I have noticed how..." He waved his hand in the air like one attempting to conjure an elusive word.

"Cautious," Richard supplied.

"Precisely!" Bingley said, snapping his fingers. "You are magnificently cautious ... er, around new acquaintances."

Darcy had no desire to be the means by which Richard would distract them. "Come, Richard. My character is neither so interesting nor complex to merit five days' study. Your mother and father are worried. This is not like you."

Richard leaned back with a groan. "I fear there is something inherently wrong with me, Darce. I have lived resourcefully, saving every extra penny to invest in the percents. It has always been my firm belief that my sacrifice would be rewarded with a comfortable establishment, and once I secured that, with a loving wife with whom to share it."

"A reasonable expectation, and one you are hardly at fault for holding."

"Ah, but it is not enough, is it?" Richard said with an edge. "Even with my recent good fortune inheriting my uncle's estate, the lady would not have me."

"Her loss, certainly not yours."

Bingley nodded vehemently. "I cannot imagine why any lady would refuse you. You are a jolly chap. Normally. Under better circumstances."

"I am not wealthy, and while I am the son of an earl, I will not inherit the title. And no one would consider me handsome."

Darcy opened his mouth to object, as did Bingley, but Richard raised his hand to silence them. "All circumstances beyond my power to change fully, and I assure you that I do not resent them. Harry can have the title and all the responsibilities that come with it. His time will never be his own, and I consider the money and properties poor compensation. No, gentlemen, what I have to offer a lady is only myself." He sighed. "And I have been forced to see that I am not suitable enough to tempt a lady into matrimony."

"If a lady loves you, sincerely and truly, she will accept you for who you are with no need for change."

"We will have to agree to disagree on that point, Darcy. My character is the one thing I have in my power to change, and change it, I must. I will."

"To what? Your character is exemplary and agreeable on all accounts." Darcy would not have Richard alter his nature for the world ... and most certainly not for an indecisive female who senselessly refused a man who would have done anything to make her happy. Fool woman.

His agitation heightened, Darcy forgot he had asked a question until Richard replied.

"I aim to be more like you."

Darcy's mouth opened, but no words, not even breath, passed his lips. A deep sense of foreboding sucked the air out of his lungs, such a dread he could not explain. He took great pride in his dignified character, so why did it chafe his consciousness for Richard to adopt his manner? He only knew he did not wish it.

The door to the library swung open, and the swishing skirts and padding slippers announced the arrival of Harriet, Richard's youngest sister. Darcy's only sister, Georgiana, followed behind her, making no noise at all.

Harriet flicked a wayward curl over her shoulder, her voice equally flippant. "Is he still a gloomy philosopher, casting his melancholy net over those of us who wish to meet with greater success for our upcoming first season, or is he the older brother I know and adore?"

Richard made a face. "Not gloomy, only awakened to my faults. I trust I will soon resume my place in your affection, Harriet."

She shrugged. "There is a glimpse of my favorite brother, at least. Mr. Bingley's influence, I trust?" Smiling at him, she added, "It is difficult to persist in an unhappy manner when in the company of your most affable friend."

She did not so much as glance at Darcy. What was he — a surly ogre? He tried not to let it bother him, but it did. Surely, Aunt and Uncle would not have called for his assistance unless they thought he would have an uplifting effect on Richard.

Bingley sat taller in his chair, the light of a brilliant idea shining in his face. "I have just the thing! What you need is to leave dreary London. Why do you not join me at Netherfield Park? The fields are favorable for riding, and the hunting, the bailiff assures me, is excellent. Come, Richard, Darcy, bring your sisters and accept my invitation. We shall make a merry party, and you will soon forget your troubles."

Harriet immediately declined. "Just because that fluff-brained

nitwit refused my brother's offer—"

A shadow crossed Richard's face, and the muscles at his jaw twitched.

"I can see you would defend her still, but I will call her what she is," Harriet continued. "One Fitzwilliam's failure does not condemn me when I am determined I shall meet with greater success. If I am to marry by the end of the year, I would do better to stay where I am more easily caught."

"Do not say that, I beg you, Harriet," Georgiana said quietly. "Just because you do not feel his heartbreak does not make it any less real."

Darcy encouraged her boldness with a smile, knowing how difficult it was for her to speak at all, and much less about the heart. She was so young, not quite sixteen, but Georgiana knew heartbreak. If Darcy ever needed a reminder of the value of honesty and loyalty, he had only to think of George Wickham — breaker of innocent hearts, dasher of dreams, charming prince of deception.

Darcy caught Richard's look, and from the stiffness in his cousin's posture, Darcy understood that he too thought of their foe.

Impervious to the tension in the room, Harriet laughed. "Do not allow me to put a damper on your fun. Please, Mr. Bingley, take my brother away. At least, remove him from the library where he has been camped the better part of this week. I daresay he could use a good airing out."

Before Darcy could refuse, Aunt Helen breezed into the library. Clapping her hands, she said, "I knew you boys would know precisely what to do."

Uncle Matlock followed behind her, his hands clasped behind his back and a smile peeking through his thick whiskers.

Between his aunt and uncle's visible relief, the anticipation growing in Georgiana's face, and the way Richard rose to stand behind one of the towers of books on the table as though it might protect him from the other occupants in the room, Darcy's decision was swift.

He dared not speak for Richard, but he trusted Georgiana's influence would persuade his cousin.

Looking over at Bingley, Darcy nodded. "I am pleased to accept your invitation."

Bingley beamed. "Excellent! We depart on the morrow."

"Jolly good!" exclaimed Uncle Matlock. Leveling a more somber

look at his son and niece, he added, "I suggest you begin packing."

Once again, Darcy found himself dashing down Upper Brook Street as though Bingley's sister Caroline was chasing him. Had he given any consideration to himself, he would not have accepted Bingley's invitation. The threat of months in Miss Bingley's company was enough to set Darcy's teeth on edge. But Aunt and Uncle Matlock were happy, Richard was out of the library, and Georgiana seemed content. He would endure Miss Bingley and the onslaught of new acquaintances they were bound to meet in Hertfordshire.



## Chapter 3

Elizabeth Bennet set her novel aside when her dearest friend, Charlotte Lucas, was announced. Rising to her feet and taking Charlotte's hands, Elizabeth pulled her over to the corner where she and her eldest sister, Jane, attempted to escape the usual ruckus and mayhem created by their vociferous mother and younger sisters inside Longbourn's drawing room.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Charlotte. Do you have news?" Elizabeth settled beside her friend on the settee.

Charlotte glanced about, lowering her voice so that Elizabeth and Jane leaned closer to hear.

"I do have news — of the best kind." Another glance about the room. Elizabeth had to read her lips to understand her now. "I was fortunate enough to be near my father when my brother asked about the gentleman at Netherfield Park."

Jane smiled dreamily, leaning forward to look at Charlotte. "How did Sir William describe Mr. Bingley?"

Glancing around the room once again to ensure they were not being overheard, Elizabeth noticed her sisters fighting over ribbons while their mother absentmindedly plucked at a piece of plum cake, no doubt dreaming of a pack of unmarried gentlemen who would come marching into Meryton to sweep her daughters off their feet, carrying them away from Longbourn and out of her anxious concern.

Elizabeth had hoped her father would call on the recently arrived gentleman who had only recently let Netherfield Park, but Mr. Bingley had returned to London to fetch the rest of his family, and her own father delighted in avoiding the question when Mother, Elizabeth, or any of her other four sisters pressed him for an answer.

She understood his humor well enough to know he would not reveal what he had or had not done until he could extract the greatest amount of vexation from it from Mama. Thus, he stood to benefit more fully from Mama's attention and favor when he finally revealed that he had, in fact, not overlooked his fatherly duty

entirely by doing what he could to advance the prospects of his five unmarried daughters.

While Elizabeth appreciated his cleverness, she would never understand why he played these games. Papa took too much pleasure in vexing Mama. Mama, in turn, took great pleasure in being vexed. And Elizabeth had long ago drawn the conclusion that if she were to have any advantage at all in her life, or be of any help to her sisters, she would have to be the one responsible for it. Not her father. Certainly not her mother.

All this, Elizabeth thought before Charlotte replied, "My father professes Mr. Bingley to be everything a gentleman ought to be. As I could extract neither a description of his person nor a more thorough account of his character, I must rely on my knowledge of my father's most highly held virtues and thus conclude that Mr. Bingley is jolly, attentive, and familiar with St. James." She pressed her lips closed, her eyes dancing impishly. Charlotte had a tremendously under-appreciated sense of humor. It was one of her features Elizabeth most loved, besides her infallible reason.

She teased in turn, "In other words, Sir William managed to establish an acquaintance with a gentleman in which he learned nothing of advantage or import."

Charlotte laughed. "Certainly nothing helpful to us unmarried females. Did Mr. Bennet do no better?"

Jane sighed. "He remains maddeningly silent on the subject."

"You? Mad?" Charlotte asked in feigned shock.

The three ladies eventually fell silent, and Elizabeth imagined their thoughts had all taken the same turn. She dearly wished to know what Mr. Bingley looked like, or, more important, if his presence at Netherfield Park would improve their society ... or their prospects.

But Sir William was not one to fix on such details, and her father was not one to share them if he had.

Charlotte sat back, cleverly changing the topic before their alternate whispers and silence drew unwanted attention from the other side of the room. "Delayed expectations aside, our new neighbor appears by all means to be a generous sort who will not refuse to widen his circle of acquaintance. And he mentioned his intention to invite more friends over the course of the hunting season."

Elizabeth's heart lightened considerably. "How considerate of

Mr. Bingley to bring friends. I pray for his sake that he brings enough to satisfy our mothers, although for myself, I am inclined to agree with Sir William and declare him to be the finest gentleman to set foot in all of Hertfordshire."

Jane looked down at her feet, struggling to control her smile. A lovely blush brightened her cheeks. Gentlemen were scarce in their limited society, and while they both were several years younger than Charlotte — and, therefore, had time enough to find matches — neither of them could afford not to recognize an opportunity when it was presented to them. They had a pittance of a dowry, an entailed estate, an undistinguished family, two sisters whose wild tendencies caused them no little concern, and few enough accomplishments of the sort society expected of the landed gentry. Their mother, ever optimistic when she was not wallowing in the depths of despair, held out high hopes for them to marry advantageously, but she had done precious little to prepare them for such a splendid match.

Had the bearer of their good news been anyone but Charlotte, Elizabeth might have let her heart soar higher at the brilliant prospect before them. But Charlotte, at the ripe age of seven and twenty, had made no secret of the burden she felt herself to be to her family ... and her determination to accept the first man who favored her with an offer of marriage. Elizabeth's heart sank with a heavy drop. She hated to think of her friend settling for anyone less than what she deserved — a gentleman who would cherish her and make her feel beautiful and appreciate her humor and treat her well.

"What do you wish for in a husband?" Elizabeth asked, hoping Charlotte would say more than a secure establishment.

Charlotte replied instantly, "I only wish to be asked. I am not romantic and require very little. Only a modest home to manage. Nothing grand, just comfortable." Her smile was thin and her eyes dull. Was that what the threat of being shelved did? Dull dreams and extinguish hope, thus stealing a lady's spark?

While Elizabeth prayed she and Jane were spared such a cruel end, she wished to spare Charlotte from an unhappy, unsuitable union.

Charlotte tilted her head toward Jane. "I hold the highest expectation of you marrying very well, Jane, and I am convinced you will be happy with whichever gentleman you choose to marry.

Such is your gentle, forgiving nature."

Jane's only disadvantage was a lack of suitable gentlemen in a position to propose. Her blush deepened over her porcelain skin. "I should very much like to fall in love with the gentleman I accept," she whispered, as though her wish was too outrageous to speak aloud. Knowing Jane, she thought her desire selfish.

"Only do not be so shy in displaying your affection," Charlotte counseled. "We know your nature, but most gentlemen are insecure creatures in need of reassurance. You must not allow for him to doubt the depth of your attachment."

"You cannot expect Jane to flirt," Elizabeth gasped.

Charlotte pursed her lips. "That is not at all what I mean, Lizzy, and you ought to know it. I only mean to point out that those of a shy disposition are too often understood as aloof or indifferent."

What her astute friend said was probably true, but Elizabeth frowned at the care a lady had to take, at the unfairness to their gender. "I know we must do our duty to our families, but I cannot help but lament the disadvantages we must overcome if we are to marry for love and not merely for convenience or, worse, lack of any other option." She took Jane's and Charlotte's hands into her own. "Both of you are more likely to place everyone else's desires above your own. More than anything, I want to see you both happily settled, united with gentlemen you deeply love."

"You often say that you will not be persuaded to marry at all unless it is for the deepest love, but you cannot truly mean it, Lizzy? Can you?" asked Jane.

"Why should we marry for anything less?"

Charlotte arched her brow. "What would a gentleman require to persuade you to marry?"

Elizabeth's smile spread over her face. "Only that he be devastatingly handsome and disgustingly rich," she teased.

Charlotte's sharp eyes examined Elizabeth. "Balderdash. That is what you say, but we all know your tendency to favor the disadvantaged and wronged. You would sooner fall in love with a poor foot soldier than a wealthy gentleman, no matter how much we wish otherwise."

"Or a gentleman denied his inheritance or tricked out of his fortune," added Jane.

Elizabeth laughed. They knew her too well.

Charlotte continued, "Furthermore, you are far too clever by half

and independent to a fault."

Jane nodded. "No ordinary gentleman will do."

"An extraordinary gentleman, then? Does such a man exist?" Elizabeth teased.

"He would have to satisfy your intellect and fill your heart, otherwise you would soon grow bored of him." Charlotte sighed. "Really, Lizzy, I pity you."

Clasping her hands over her heart, Elizabeth failed completely in keeping her high humor out of her voice. "When you put it so plainly, Charlotte, I am absolutely doomed! I suppose there is nothing left for me to do but accept my lot. If Jane is bound to marry to save our family, and you are determined to marry the first man who proposes, then I declare I shall marry a perspicacious ... and penniless ... pauper."

Jane looked askance at her. "Marry a pauper if you must, only do not marry an officer."

Elizabeth giggled, leaning in conspiratorially to keep her voice low. "Never that! We would hear of nothing but red coats and brass buttons for years to come. Mother would praise me, and Lydia and Kitty would become so jealous they would not rest until they have secured impoverished officers of their own. Poor Papa would never have any peace."

Charlotte took a deep breath, shaking her head as she exhaled. "We must face the harsh truth, ladies. Unless the right gentlemen come to us, there is little else we can do to improve our prospects. We would sooner strike a deal with Napoleon himself and end the war. I hate to agree with you, Lizzy, but we are all three of us doomed to snatch up whomever we might. Jane, I have no doubt, shall fare the best of us, for I truly cannot envision any other ending but the happiest for someone so sweet-natured. I would do well to marry a clergyman, whom I will encourage to attend generously to his parishioners and his garden, leaving me free to make our cottage as comfortable as his modest income will allow. And you, Lizzy are bound to surprise us all by marrying either exceedingly poorly or exceedingly well."

"And be accused of marrying above myself? I would rather not," Elizabeth scoffed. "All the sideways glances from people who would assume the worst of me, who would gossip amongst themselves that I had bewitched him with my cunning manipulative arts. I would rather marry a gentleman with no prospects, or, as you so

eloquently put it, a penniless poet or philosopher."

"How terribly prejudiced of you, Lizzy. Really, though, if you must choose between the two"—Charlotte said dryly—"then I beg you to consider the disadvantaged son over the impoverished wordsmith. There is no quicker way to kill a stout love than with an empty stomach and an earful of bad poetry."

They laughed at their situation, making light of their prospects because they were powerless to do anything more. Too much — their happiness, well-being, security, their very freedom — rested solely on their ability to marry advantageously. Elizabeth hated the unfairness of it. She hated the desperation wrapping its cold fingers around her stomach and stealing her breath. And she hated how her expectations rose just like everyone else's at the thought of Mr. Bingley and the company he might bring with him to Netherfield Park.

# Chapter 4

Darcy attempted to draw his cousin and sister out in conversation, but Georgiana was naturally quiet, and Richard still pined over Miss Honeyfield.

He must have dozed. Given their unexpected departure with so little notice, Darcy had stayed awake attending to his correspondence, crawling into bed a few short hours before they were supposed to set out. London had blurred into vast fields and long stretches of road ... until the carriage jostled and he noticed the changed view through the window.

Cottages huddled together, and they slowed considerably. A consultation with his pocket watch determined that he had slept deeper and longer than he had thought. This market village must be Meryton. They were close to Netherfield Park.

Meryton was much the same as any other village with a baker, butcher shop, milliner, a coach inn and tavern. He did, however, notice a bookshop and a sign in the haberdasher's window boasting a circulating library — sights which inclined Darcy to think more kindly of the place.

Several villagers milled about, mostly farmers and merchants going about their business. Out of the corner of his eye, a slip of a girl with uneven blonde braids ran through the square with a puppy bounding at her heels. Darcy turned in his seat in time to see her dodge between his coach and Bingley's in front of them. Darcy's heart leapt into his throat. He jabbed his cane against the roof, but the coachman must have seen her, for Georgiana nearly tumbled into Darcy's lap when they jolted to a stop.

It was not until Darcy saw the girl and her pet safely on the other side of his carriage window that he could breathe again. Where were her parents? Did one of the nearby estates not provide a school? It was not a commonly accepted responsibility, but one for which Darcy felt strongly. All the children of Pemberley's tenants had access to a basic education.

He saw Georgiana settled, then leaned against the carriage squabs, returning his gaze through the windowpane as his heartbeat

calmed to a steadier rhythm.

They passed three young ladies walking along the side of the road. One of them twirled around, her green gown puffing like a tulip over her muddy half-boots. Darcy was about to look away when her eyes met his. Dark, curious eyes — fine eyes — held his gaze boldly. A pleasant smile curled her lips, spreading over her cheeks, a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day. He forgot he had meant to turn away. He wondered who she was. She was bold to lock eyes with a stranger. With a widened smile, she turned to her companions, saying something which provoked their laughter.

Handsome and bold and impertinent.

Fortunately, they passed before he made a fool of himself with his unseemly staring. At the most, she was a squire's daughter, certainly nobody of consequence.

Her smile lingered in Darcy's mind as they continued down a narrower road. Some minutes more, and he was close to achieving mastery over his thoughts, when their carriage crawled to a complete stop.

Georgiana peered outside. "Why are we stopped?" she asked, looking at Darcy for an answer.

Richard lowered the window on his side of the carriage. "Bingley's carriage is stopped, too. I cannot see beyond it," he reported over the distant but sharp, frantic yips of what could only be Mrs. Hurst's dog. Raising the glass, Richard added, "I do not envy Bingley having to ride with that little devil all the way from London. When she is not so busy barking, she is snapping at anyone who does not agree with her."

"Duchess or Miss Bingley?" Darcy mumbled to himself, though the twitch of Richard's lips suggested he overheard. It relieved Darcy to see evidence that his cousin's sense of humor was not yet lost. He could not, nor did he wish to, imagine Richard without his hearty laugh and lively conversation. But he said nothing. Nor did he chuckle.

The silence in the carriage thickened.

Georgiana chewed her lips and picked at her fingernails.

The silence grew stifling. The Richard of a week ago — before that dreadful Miss Honeyfield had made him question his character — would never have allowed for awkwardness in conversation.

Not knowing what to say, Darcy decided to act. "Let us see what is happening, Rich." To Georgiana, he added, "We will not tarry."



Darcy made quick work alighting the carriage to keep what warmth could be had inside with his sister. Hertfordshire, except for one brief ray of sunshine, was every bit as dreary as London, despite Bingley's claim to the contrary.

He and Richard picked their way around the muck and puddles, past the horses, the piercing barks getting louder as they neared Bingley's conveyance.

The door flung open, and Bingley emerged, eyes glazed over and shoulders hovering by his ears.

Mrs. Hurst's shrill voice pushed past Bingley. "Shut the door! I shall never forgive you if Duchess escapes! The poor dear is agitated."

Bingley shut the door more firmly behind him than was necessary (the closest thing to an outburst Darcy had ever witnessed from his most amiable friend), but he did not complain. He fell into step beside Richard, his shoulders easing and his usual unconcerned expression returning. "I begged Louisa to allow Duchess to ride on the box with the coachman, but my sister insisted on holding her the entire way. She smothers the poor thing with affection. Duchess really is a good little girl, if Louisa would allow her some space."

Darcy would reserve judgment for his friend's sake, but he would make no attempts to get close to the snarling lapdog.

They continued down the lane, and the reason for their stoppage made her presence known with a loud bray. A large man with a red handkerchief tucked in his brown coat gripped both sides of her harness. "Come on, Clarice," he called with a mighty tug.

The mule's hooves dug further into the soft earth, her long ears flicking back and forth.

Letting go, the man took off his hat to mop his forehead with the bright handkerchief, his face breaking into a bashful smile as Darcy, Richard, and Bingley passed his cart laden with various cuts of meat, poultry, and baskets of eggs cushioned with straw.

Never having met a stranger in his life, Bingley approached the butcher. "Good morning, sir. It seems that your mule has decided she has walked far enough." He ran his hand down her neck. "Clarice, is it? A fine name for a fine animal. I am rather partial to it. However, I must say that you are giving your master a great deal of trouble, and I should very much like to pass."

The mule said nothing in reply.

Darcy jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward Bingley's

carriage. "Is the barking making her uneasy?" He knew from his tenants that mules were prone to attack dogs unless they were trained to be around them. Really, the two species did not mix.

"A gentleman whose knowledge extends beyond purebred horseflesh. I am honored to make your acquaintance, sir, and hope you will allow me to properly present the smartest creature in my employ to you. This is Clarice, and my name is Gillet. At your service." He clicked his heels together and bowed.

Clarice snorted and brayed, unimpressed, as Bingley introduced them. A female with a strong mind. Darcy was disposed to like her, even though her stubbornness prevented their party from arriving at their destination.

Richard stepped over to the mule's other side, talking soothingly to her. But Mrs. Hurst's dog did not cease barking, and no matter how many carrots and apples Mr. Gillet offered or how softly Richard crooned to her, Clarice refused to budge.

With one eye on the animal, Bingley said, "I have often heard mules praised. If Clarice represents her race well, perhaps the colonel will suggest their superiority over horses to the Lieutenant General."

Gillet's laughter boomed. "Flattery will get you nowhere with Clarice, sir, but I admire your effort. I am pleased to know Netherfield Park is let by a man of good sense and equal humor. Mules are far more intelligent than horses. They would sooner ignore all danger and carry their riders straight to their demise than to refuse to charge into it."

Darcy could have pointed out that therein lay the biggest obstacle, for while a mule might protect his rider, the creature would sooner flee from battle at the first sign of conflict than stay and fight.

Having struck on one of Mr. Gillet's favorite topics, and a subject on which he was a considerable authority, Darcy learned much more about the hardy, mixed breed than he had ever thought he would need to know. However, while the conversation proved as entertaining as it was informative, the barking from the carriage grew more insistent, and Clarice's agitation mounted.

Mr. Gillet shook his head. "I am dreadfully sorry, gentlemen, but until the barking stops, I do not think I will be able to persuade Clarice to move an inch. She does not like dogs. Not one bit."

Bingley shoved his fingers through his hair. "Duchess has not

ceased barking since departing from London, and I cannot very well see her stopping now."

The road no longer being an option, Darcy looked about. "Are we within walking distance to Netherfield Park?"

The butcher pointed down the lane visible through the grass to their right. "Very near indeed. I fear that is why I am taking up more than my fair share of the lane. There is a nasty hole in that corner under the grass, and I did not wish to fall into it."

"I will see to that at once," Bingley proclaimed.

Mr. Gillet smiled. "That would be very good of you, Mr. Bingley. I have a feeling you will be as good for Netherfield Park as it promises to be to you."

After hours cooped up inside a carriage, the exercise sounded appealing. Bingley's sisters would complain, but if they walked along the rim of the lane as the three young ladies they had passed earlier did, they ought not sully their slippers too much. An image of the fine-eyed lady's muddy half-boots popped into Darcy's mind. He imagined she was not afraid of tramping through muddy fields and hopping over streams.

Before Darcy could suggest his plan, the door to Bingley's carriage opened, the plumes of a garish bonnet preceding Miss Bingley. A white ball of fur with a pink tongue twisted in her skirts, tugging against the tangled fabric until she burst free.

Down Miss Bingley went in a heap, and in a flash of glistening, snow-white fur, Duchess raced directly toward Clarice, hair flying, tongue lolling, pink bows bobbing, completely unaware of the chaos she caused or the danger to her much smaller self.

Bingley rushed to his sisters' side, lifting Caroline and holding Louisa back, leaving Darcy to reach for the fool dog darting back and forth around Clarice's wide hooves. Richard and Mr. Gillet tried to calm Clarice, but her eyes were wild.

Mrs. Hurst wailed, "My precious baby!"

Risking a kick or trample, Darcy reached forward to grab the dog. The mule rose onto her haunches as far as the cart permitted, shaking the small wagon and shifting the contents.

"Not the eggs, Clarice! Calm yourself, love!" Mr. Gillet clamored.

Stretching forward, Darcy's fingers caught Duchess' bejeweled collar, and he pulled the dog to him, tucking her against his chest as he turned and backed away. His silk hat lay in the middle of a puddle, and Darcy was happy his head had been spared the blow

that had knocked it off.

Duchess licked his face, covering his chin with slobber in hurried thanks for saving her life. Bingley was right. She was a good little girl. No sooner had he thought it than she wriggled free from his hold and dropped to the ground.

He darted after her, but she was a puppy on a mission. Duchess had not escaped her confinement for so little a taste of freedom.

Ahead of him, he heard a whistle, and out of the corner of his eye, Darcy saw the three young ladies they had passed earlier. The one with the green dress and lively eyes crouched to the ground, whistling and patting her knees. Reaching into her pocket, she extracted a treat.

The miscreant ran over to her, escaping out from under Clarice without so much as a tap or a bruise.

The mule was in high fury, the whites of her eyes wide and her kicks and bucks upsetting the cart.

"Calm down, Clarice! The eggs!" Mr. Gillet pleaded.

Seeing Duchess safe in the arms of the fine-eyed maiden, Darcy joined the butcher and Richard in their efforts to calm the mule. Leaning her weight back for another kick, Richard grabbed the basket with the eggs Mr. Gillet was so worried about from the back of the cart, heaving the lot up at the same time Clarice reared, shoving the edge of the cart against his elbows and sending the top layer of eggs flying.

Not seeing where they went, but knowing that what goes up must come down, Darcy ducked and hoped for the best.

He felt the thud at the same time he heard the crack. Raw egg plopped down the left side of his head, slid down his collar and oozed a slimy path down his back.

So much sticky slime.

Everything went calm. Even Clarice.

Darcy's skin burned under the attention of so many observers.

It was Richard who broke into laughter first. The butcher attempted to contain his merriment, but as he surveyed the damage and the eggs missing from the basket, he succumbed to Richard's influence. "Oh dear, that was the duck egg. Jemima is an old duck, and her shells have grown rather weak. Are you well, Mr. Darcy? That was quite a blow you took to the head."

Richard, his humor restored in full, smacked Darcy on the shoulder, sticking Darcy's shirt to the mucus-like fluid clinging to

his skin. "Fear not, good sir, my cousin's head is as firm as his disposition. I will be sorry for the loss at the breakfast table in the morning. I am rather partial to duck eggs."

Darcy glared at Richard.

Bingley, who had taken his leisure depositing his sister inside the carriage along with Mrs. Hurst and her precocious dog, now eyed the three young ladies standing along the side of the road.

Darcy could not help but notice them either. The one who had cleverly coaxed Duchess away from Clarice observed him. He stood as proudly as he could — with duck egg running down the side of his face and sticking his shirt to his skin — and met her gaze.

Never had he felt himself at a greater disadvantage.

Her lips twitched into a smile that spread up to her dancing eyes, and in that instant, and only for a moment, Darcy forgot his mortification.

## Chapter 5

Elizabeth bit her lips together and held her breath. The man before her belonged in a fashion plate with his perfectly tailored, tall frame, his coat snugly wrapped around broad shoulders. No padding there, so far as she could tell. He was the picture of elegance, but he was not a dandy. His curly hair, worn in the Brutus style, tumbled over his forehead, and her fingers practically itched to run through it. (The bit that was not covered in egg, that was.)

Such a dignified figure covered in slime. She thought she saw a flicker of amusement cross his handsome features, but he so quickly replaced it with a scowl, Elizabeth could not be certain. He pulled out a silk handkerchief to wipe his face as a glob of egg plopped from the cape of his coat to splat against the top of his boot.

Elizabeth covered her mouth with her gloved hands, but when his scowl intensified and he nodded his head in perverse acknowledgment of his affliction, she could repress her laughter no more.

Clarice tossed her head in the air and brayed at the stiff shouldered gentleman.

As though the universe conspired to expose the poor gentleman — for how could her sympathies not extend to such a man? — Sir William added his stylish phaeton to the line of carriages blocked by the obstinate mule.

With a nod at their group, Sir William joined the fair-haired gentleman with the pleasing smile (whose eyes — Elizabeth could not fail to notice — constantly wandered in Jane's direction. A gentleman of superior taste. Elizabeth was inclined to like him very much already.)

In a booming voice, Sir William said, "Mr. Bingley, I had heard you might arrive today and thus I took advantage of the break in the weather to drive to Netherfield Park and extend an invitation to you and your party to the Meryton Assembly two weeks hence. How convenient to run into you, though I may add, I hardly expected to meet you and your guests on the road." Sir William inclined his head toward the butcher, who resumed tugging at

Clarice's bridle.

If Sir William noticed the egg dripping from the surly gentleman's coat, he was too polite to comment on it. He applied his wide smile and receptive manner to every individual in the small crowd assembled on the road, and he took great pleasure in performing introductions — the very image of a master of ceremonies overseeing an impromptu dance. Out of doors. In the middle of a blocked lane. Beside a cart loaded with ham hocks, beef ribs, limp poultry, and legs of lamb. He only missed his sash.

He introduced the kindly gentleman with an eye for Jane as Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth tested the name in her mind — Mrs. Jane Bingley — then promptly laughed at her own folly. How quickly her mind had jumped from introductions to matrimony!

Elizabeth listened with interest as Mr. Bingley presented his friends. Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire — a grand name, to be sure. The gentleman had yet to smile, in stark contrast to the third gentleman. He struggled even more than Elizabeth did to contain his laughter (if one could say he struggled at all when he chortled every time he looked upon Mr. Darcy). The jolly man's familiarity was soon explained when Mr. Bingley introduced him as Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy's cousin. What Mr. Darcy seemed to lack in humor, the colonel possessed in abundance, and Elizabeth was inclined to like him very much as well.

Which left her opinion of Mr. Darcy uncertain. The picture in front of her lent her to believe he was not a man accustomed to being the brunt of a joke. However, the ease with which his cousin teased him and ignored his glares inclined Elizabeth to conclude that he was not as proud as his stern expression would lead her to believe.

Mr. Bingley motioned toward the carriages, indicating the sweet Maltese, his two sisters, and one brother-in-law inside the first. They did well to remain inside with the pup, who was blessed with more social manners than common sense. The little dog had seemed to be excited to meet a new friend — no matter how Clarice gave every suggestion that the gesture was unwanted.

One Miss Darcy remained inside the second carriage. Elizabeth wished she would join them. Charlotte, however, praised Miss Darcy's good sense for avoiding the chilly wind and soggy ground. Jane, too, added to the young lady's justifications, on mentioning how shy she would be to meet so many new acquaintances in such

an unexpected way. To these excuses, Mr. Darcy said nothing, and Elizabeth's curiosity toward the Darcy duo soared.

Mr. Bingley, who now stood closer to Jane than he did to his carriage, said, "If Netherfield Park is only a short walk down this lane, I think we would do well to stretch our legs and complete the journey on foot." His eyes flickered over to the group of ladies. "Perhaps, the ladies would agree to a quick stroll down the drive?"

Sir William considered the suggestion an excellent one, his gaze flickering between the two evenly matched groupings of ladies and gentlemen suggestively. Sometimes he was as bad as Mama with their blatant attempts at matchmaking.

Mr. Darcy's scowl deepened. Whatever his true character proved to be, he was not a fool.

Colonel Fitzwilliam nudged him with his elbow. "Come, Darcy. We must not think ourselves above such exertions. Especially when we are in such fine company."

What the colonel lacked in looks, he more than made up for in charm. And when his smiling eyes landed on Charlotte, Elizabeth would have trodden through knee-deep mud for the opportunity he presented to her friend. Strangely, his manners stiffened as he walked to her side, as though recalling some unpleasantness, but he extended his arm, which Charlotte graciously accepted.

Mr. Bingley was quick to claim Jane as his walking companion, and Sir William returned to his curricule, leaving Elizabeth standing with Mr. Darcy.

She turned to him, curious to see what he would do.

He opened his mouth and just as promptly closed it again. Heaving a sigh, he finally spoke. "I wish to offer you my arm, but as you see"—he held his sleeve out for her inspection—"it is covered in egg." Indeed, the slime had spread.

Filled with mirth, Elizabeth teased, "You certainly know how to make a first impression, Mr. Darcy."

"I assure you, it is not often I appear to such disadvantage."

His seriousness made her spirits rise, and it was with great effort she matched his expressionless tone. "It is a rare man who would choose to appear so, sir."

His eyes narrowed, as though he suspected she was teasing him. Which she was.

"Is it your custom to laugh at strangers, Miss Elizabeth?" There was a challenge in his dark eyes she was powerless to ignore. Rise



to it, she would.

"I should hope not, Mr. Darcy, though I dearly love to laugh. For what do we live but to make sport for our neighbors and laugh at them in our turn?"

Still no smile. Either the gentleman had no humor at all, or he was the greatest master the world had ever known in concealing it. She could not imagine him so flat, and so she prodded a little more. "Do you disapprove?" she asked boldly.

"No."

Such a terse, blunt answer. She pressed, "Then why do you scowl?"

His brows furrowed into a deep V. "It was unintentional, I assure you." He shook his head, his expression relaxing. "I am merely attempting, quite poorly, to conceal my embarrassment."

Mr. Darcy's frank admission surprised Elizabeth. She was more inclined than before to think well of a gentleman who owned to a fault. Arching an eyebrow, she teased, "Then allow me to assure you that I will reserve judgment until I have more fully sketched your character."

She had hoped to provoke a laugh, but the door of Mr. Bingley's carriage opened just then. The same lady who had crumpled to the ground earlier scrambled inelegantly out of the coach. The fierce determination in her demeanor, the possessive look in her eyes, might have made Elizabeth laugh once more had the lady not winced with every step she took toward Mr. Darcy.

"Miss Bingley, you must rest your ankle." There was a bite in Mr. Darcy's tone which suggested he did not think much of Miss Bingley's efforts on his behalf. But the lady had made her intentions plain to Elizabeth. Miss Bingley would rather hobble on an aching ankle, risking permanent injury, than allow Mr. Darcy to accompany Elizabeth down the lane.

It was also as plain — painfully so — how unaffected Mr. Darcy was to the lady's exertions. Without another word, he turned her toward the carriage and helped her inside with a firm warning to keep Duchess from escaping again.

Seeing how excited the dog was, and how unlikely she was to stop barking without a worthy distraction, Elizabeth reached into her reticule to produce what was left of the wrapped biscuit. The poor dear, cooped up inside a carriage. "Perhaps this will ease the discomfort," Elizabeth said.

Miss Bingley gave her a strange look and accepted the wrapped biscuit. "Thank you," she said.

Elizabeth bit her tongue and sucked in her breath. Did she think the biscuit was for *her*? She was, of course, welcome to it. Elizabeth nodded, not trusting herself to say a word.

Her Furry Grace, on the other hand, did not seem amused at the loss of her treat. She snapped at Miss Bingley.

Mr. Darcy, who had also gone remarkably silent, cleared his throat and extended his arm — the one *not* covered in egg — to Elizabeth. She took it, grateful for an excuse to take her leave. It was not until they turned away from the carriage that she saw the corner of his lips twitch.

So, he *did* have a sense of humor. How delightful!



\* \* \*

The rest of their party waited for them at the entrance to the lane.

The colonel clapped Mr. Darcy on the shoulder. "It is good we came here, Darcy. This is as good a place as any for a man's spirits to be restored."

Elizabeth did not know why Mr. Darcy's spirits needed to be restored, but between the implication of suffering and her own eyewitness account of his encounter with a brutal duck's egg, she decided that his brooding temperament was justified enough to encourage her sympathy.

The walk was short, and the conversation brief. Mr. Darcy did not linger a moment longer than was necessary before politely dismissing himself and continuing inside, effectively breaking up their group and sending Elizabeth on her way with Charlotte and Jane.

The coaches passed them on their way out. The treat had done its trick.

Elizabeth did not see Miss Darcy peering through the window, but she felt Miss Bingley's glare raising the hairs on the back of her neck. Had the lady overheard Elizabeth's brief exchange with Mr. Darcy, she would know she had nothing over which to concern herself. Besides, what sort of lady set her cap at a man admittedly low in spirits? Had he been disappointed in love? Elizabeth could not imagine how, unless the gentleman was truly and utterly disagreeable. But she had seen proof of his goodness. Endangering himself to snatch Duchess out from under Clarice's tramping hooves. Admitting to a weakness. Cracking a smile. He could not be so abominable.

Turning to her companions, she asked, "What do you think of our neighbors?"

Charlotte pursed her lips, no doubt giving practical consideration to her reply. "Mr. Bingley seemed immediately taken with Jane, and I could not help but notice how Mr. Darcy lingered behind to escort you down the lane. Colonel Fitzwilliam was pleasant company. I learned he is currently on leave from his post in London."

Not an heir, then. Soldiers traveled so often, they rarely kept a residence. And yet, a home of her own was the one thing Charlotte said she required. Would a place in a man's heart be enough security for her friend? Charlotte did not have the pressure she and Jane did of marrying well — which was a kinder way of saying they needed to marry into a fortune. So determined was Elizabeth not to be swayed by wealth, she was content to learn as little about Mr. Darcy's as she could. And while she was not so contradictory as to wish him in a reduced state, neither did she wish him very rich.

Mr. Gillet doffed his hat as they passed.

Charlotte said, "I daresay the dog ought to be indoors by now."

"Thank you, Miss Lucas. Sir William continued to Longbourn, so that he might share news of Mr. Bingley's arrival and see you home before the rains come." He put his hat back on, his cart clattering down the drive.

Charlotte sighed. "Once your sisters discover there is a colonel staying as a guest at Netherfield Park, they will give him little choice but to marry one of them." She spoke so matter-of-factly, so devoid of jealousy, only a ping of regret was discernible.

Elizabeth wrapped her arm around Charlotte's, pulling her closer. "You know how Mary disapproves of violence. She would

sooner marry a clergyman than spend more than two seconds with the colonel. And as for Kitty and Lydia..." Elizabeth sighed. What could she say about them? Her two youngest sisters were too immature to be out in society, and Elizabeth could only hope they would not embarrass their family in front of the new residents of Netherfield Park. "They are more enamored with the red coat than they are with the man who wears it. So long as Colonel Fitzwilliam dons his regulars, I do not think he is in danger of them."

Charlotte smiled. "I will neither hope nor despair, but will simply make myself known." Leaning over to Jane, she asked, "And what did you learn of Mr. Bingley?"

Jane blushed, her blue eyes brightening. "He is very attentive. Everything a gentleman ought to be." She took a breath, adding, "He did mention that he hoped the countryside healed hearts as well as it stirred Duchess."

Elizabeth gasped. So, she had been close to the truth after all! One of the gentlemen was recovering from a heartbreak. It had to be Mr. Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy or Colonel Fitzwilliam?" asked Charlotte.

Jane chewed her lip. "Oh, dear. He did not say, and while I do not think Mr. Bingley is adept at keeping secrets, it did not occur to me to ask, nor would I have known how to do so discreetly."

"His manners are too open for secrets," Charlotte agreed.

"But I cannot imagine he would say anything to hurt a friend. Of course, we hardly know him, but he *seems* to be genuinely kind," Jane added, much more concerned with Mr. Bingley's impression than she was over the unnamed, heartbroken gentleman.

It had to be Mr. Darcy. His stern manners and difficult smile took on a whole new significance, and Elizabeth's opinion of Mr. Darcy improved dramatically. After all, it must be difficult for a man suffering to laugh at all. It was not so much that he was proud — although she would not completely disclaim him of the trait — but that he was in pain. If only she could find out ... just to be certain.

Charlotte stopped, her stern gaze piercing Elizabeth. "Such a delicate subject is nothing of which we might inquire. Nor would it be wise to hint at another's despair for nothing more than the satisfaction of our own curiosity."

Elizabeth scoffed. "I am not as heartless as you think me capable of being to rub salt in the wound of a gentleman so recently

disappointed."

"No, but your curiosity often gets the better of you. Were you or were you not scheming a way of asking?"

"No!" Elizabeth fibbed, then added guiltily, "Well, maybe. But I will keep my questions to myself and content myself with my own observations." She made a face as though to say, *Are you satisfied?*

Charlotte resumed walking, pulling them along. "Very well. I am satisfied. Furthermore, I will ask: where have your observations led?"

Elizabeth was glad she asked. Charlotte was an excellent judge of character. "I believe Mr. Darcy was disappointed. It explains his taciturn manners. He hides his pain behind a façade of stoicism."

"Hmm, and here I was convinced that it was Colonel Fitzwilliam. He wavered too severely between gaiety and gravity."

They both looked to Jane to settle the matter. Wringing her hands together, she said, "I can hardly say, though I see how it could be either one."

Elizabeth chuckled. "Oh, Jane, what can I ever do to deserve such a sweet sister as you?"

In her modesty, Jane protested, insisting Elizabeth was every bit as sweet as her sister claimed her to be. Elizabeth and Charlotte laughed at that, and it was with light hearts the three ladies entered Longbourn's drawing room where an eager band of Bennets sat around Sir William, pelting him with questions about their new, unmarried neighbors.

## Chapter 6

Caroline Bingley paced alone in her room, her dinner tray untouched on the table beside her. The image of that country hoyden with her nerve-grinding laugh, the hem of her skirt six inches deep in mud, was enough to put Caroline off her appetite. The memory of how Mr. Darcy had looked at her, had smiled at her, had offered her his arm after she had made a fool of Caroline, made Caroline want to scream and stamp her perfectly sound ankle.

If it had not been for Louisa's stupid dog!

She pounded her fist against the table, clattering the cutlery. This was supposed to be her shot at Mr. Darcy, and no impertinent miss was going to get in her way.

Taking a deep breath, Caroline sank into the chair by the window, viewing the facts as Mr. Darcy must have seen them. He required a lady who would do him credit, a lady of many accomplishments. A lady like her. Mrs. Caroline Darcy, Mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House, had such a fine ring to it.

Really, the ladies tramping along the side of the road were too far beneath his notice to warrant her concern. The fair one, Caroline supposed, would be considered a beauty. Miss Jane Bennet ... or some such insignificant name. Caroline would have to keep an eye on that one for her brother's sake. She had seen how he ogled her. It would not do for him to attach himself to a pretty-faced nobody. Mr. Darcy would never allow for an alliance with their family if Charles married a woman without connections.

The second lady — Lucius or Luckett or something of the sort — was plain and clearly past her bloom. She was of no concern.

And that third one — Elizabeth Bennet — the insolent female who had the audacity to laugh at her betters. At Mr. Darcy! To shame!

A tap sounded at the door, and a maid peeked inside, her voice timorous. "Is there anything you require, miss?"

Caroline waved her off when a thought had her swallowing her insulting dismissal. The girl was not one of their London maids, but rather a local girl. A girl who no doubt knew more about Miss

Elizabeth Bennet than anyone else in the household. If Caroline was to keep herself above her competition, she would do well to learn her faults.

Forcing a smile and softening her tone, she waved the girl in. "I wonder what you might tell me about the Bennet family. They are close neighbors of ours, are they not?"

The girl took a step inside the room, twisting her hands in front of her, eyes fixed on the carpet at her feet. "Mr. Bennet's estate is nearby at Longbourn."

A country squire's daughter. Well, well.

When the maid volunteered no further information, Caroline prompted her. "I had the pleasure of meeting his two daughters today. I wonder what you can tell me about them."

"If you'll tell me which two, I'd be happy to oblige, miss."

Caroline swallowed hard. Dear Lord, there were more? Ignoring the maid's question, she asked one of her own. "Pray tell, how many Bennets are there?"

"Just the five daughters."

Five daughters! "Not all of them unmarried, I hope?" Caroline scoffed at the ridiculousness of their situation. Just imagine! A family with five unmarried daughters! Their mother must be desperate.

"Tis so, miss, but all of them are out, so it'll not be long before one of them marries." Warming to the conversation, the girl added, "Especially with Miss Bennet being so handsome. And Miss Elizabeth is just as handsome and liked by everyone she meets, her being so clever and all." She closed her mouth and looked back down at the floor, her lack of praise for the remaining three Bennet daughters like the scent of blood to a hawk.

Caroline swooped in for the kill. "What can you tell me of their three other sisters?"

The girl clasped her hands in front, picking at her fingers and shuffling her feet. "Nothing much. Miss Mary is very knowledgeable. If she had been born a gentleman, she'd have been destined for the church."

How droll. "And the other two?"

"Kitty and Lydia are often in each other's company, and a livelier pair you'll be hard pressed to find." She clamped her mouth shut as though she feared she had said too much. Her voice was tight when she added, "Is there anything else I can get you, miss?"

A lively pair. Caroline did not yet know what to make of this description, but she sensed its significance. And she would use it to raise herself in Mr. Darcy's estimation.

Already planning, Caroline absently dismissed the maid. She would have to intensify her pursuit. She would flirt more. She would request Mr. Darcy's favorite meals. She would oversee Netherfield Park with a diligence worthy of a far grander estate. She would befriend his insipid little sister. Perhaps, she would suggest a shopping excursion into Meryton on the morrow. Yes, that would do. She could display her elevated taste in contrast with the meager offerings they were certain to find at the local shops.

Sitting taller, Caroline took a bite of the fish on her plate. She would be the best hostess, the most attentive sister, the most accomplished lady in all of Hertfordshire — hardly a difficult task given the deficient competition. She would rise so far above their company, Mr. Darcy could not help but admire her.



# Chapter 7

Darcy debated the wisdom of venturing unaccompanied into the breakfast room. Miss Bingley was well aware of his early hours, and he did not need to ask one of the servants to know she waited for him there. He had already spent the first hour of daylight seeing to his bottomless abyss of correspondence, but he could no longer ignore the rumbling in his stomach.

Still, he lingered until he heard the other occupants of the wing stir. Mr. Hurst could be counted on to consume his meals at an appointed time, and Duchess ensured the earlier rising of her mistress. As troublesome as the tiny minx had proved to be the day before, Darcy could not help but smile when he thought of her.

Her Grace pranced down the hall with a shiny, satin ribbon tied at the top of her head. Darcy bowed as she passed.

"Duchess! Come here, my little muffin! Mummy wants to give you cuddly wuddlies." Mrs. Hurst's baby talk took a sharp turn when the lady swiveled on her foot to face her husband. "Hurst, how could you let her out of my sitting room when you know she will catch her death from the cold marble and thin carpets?"

Mr. Hurst grimaced a greeting to Darcy, and lunged forward to grab the dog. With a growl, she snapped at him.

He pulled his hands back, straightening to look exasperatedly at his wife. "It is no use, Louisa. She does not like me."

"It is no wonder when you are so rough. My sugar plum is as delicate as a highborn lady and must be treated with the gentlest care." She turned to Darcy, and he cringed. He had hoped she would be so intent on her beloved pet, who had disappeared down the stairs, that she would overlook him. "Mr. Darcy, I really cannot thank you enough for saving my precious baby."

He had heard sufficient gratitude at dinner the evening before, and he really was in no mood to hear any more. "I pray you think no more of it, Mrs. Hurst."

"How can I think of anything else?" she gasped. "To think that my sweet, little angel was so close to being trampled by that dreadful beast! You were quite the hero, Mr. Darcy, and I shall

never forget your bravery on behalf of my darling cream puff."

Darcy thought it best to keep their procession moving. He bowed to allow the Hursts to continue before him, and was about to follow, when he saw Georgiana slip out of her room. She peeked down the hall as though she, too, hoped to avoid certain individuals. He was relieved to see her smile when she saw him.

She clutched his arm and whispered, "I had hoped not to find myself alone in the breakfast room with Miss Bingley. She still terrifies me. You will not leave me alone with her, will you, William?"

"On my honor, I will not abandon you."

He heard her exhale and felt her relax, and by the time they entered the now-crowded breakfast room, he was proud to see how his reassurance had bolstered his sister's confidence. She did not flinch when Miss Bingley snapped her greeting.

"Good morning, Miss Darcy, Mr. Darcy. I trust you slept well?" Caroline Bingley sat so stiffly, Darcy had to wonder how long she had been waiting for them.

He replied curtly, "Very well, thank you." Turning to the sideboard, he invested more attention than was necessary to his plate and Georgiana's. There was nothing in his manner to encourage further conversation, but Miss Bingley spoke anyway.

"I have arranged a shopping excursion with Louisa into Meryton this afternoon, and we would be honored for you to join us, Miss Darcy," she said breathlessly.

Darcy spun on his heel to face her. Swallowing his terse reply, he said with admirable restraint, "While I thank you for your willingness to entertain Georgiana, I could not in good conscience allow you to cause yourself further injury by walking on your ankle before the apothecary has seen to it and the proper amount of time has passed." She had dismissed the apothecary Bingley had sent for the afternoon before, arousing Darcy's suspicions that her "injury" was more imaginary than real. No doubt, she must have been frustrated it had been her brother who had scampered to her side rather than he, but Darcy would choose the dog over her any day.

She lifted her chin haughtily. "I am an extraordinarily quick healer."

He was supposed to be impressed, he knew, but if Miss Bingley believed him so gullible, then she was extraordinarily afflicted with delusions. "Of course, you will wish to ask Georgiana directly, but I

had hoped she would join Bingley, Richard, and me for a ride over the property."

Her lips tightened into a thin smile. "I would never deny your sister any pleasure. You are an attentive and generous brother. However, I have come to think of Miss Darcy as a sister, and she very well might prefer female companionship to sweaty horses and male relatives."

The predatory gleam in Miss Bingley's eye as she proclaimed an intimacy which did not belong to her twisted Darcy's stomach. Any woman who would use him to elevate her own position in society was as undesirable as those ladies who felt it incumbent upon them to point out their own accomplishments when they ought to speak for themselves.

Richard entered the room then, his appearance generally haggard, though he was freshly shaved, brushed, and polished. He bowed to his hostess, who spared him not one word more than the simplest greeting, and bent down to scratch Duchess under the chin, mumbling, "Now, you are a good girl; yes, you are."

Judging that his cousin had not slept well, Darcy poured him a cup of coffee.

Richard rose, and Duchess trotted over to her mistress, who lifted her onto her lap and set a plate of kidneys in front of her, which the precious darling devoured in one indelicate gulp.

Miss Bingley gasped in horror. "Do not allow that — that creature! — at my table!"

Mrs. Hurst defended her pet admirably to her sister's demands.

Richard seemed as pleased as Darcy was to ignore them both. Jabbing a pile of kidneys with a fork onto his plate, he said, "We had better eat these before they go to the dogs." He tipped his plate over Darcy's, sliding one of the organs onto it. "I hope you and Bingley have an engaging activity planned for the day. My mind needs an occupation."

Darcy nodded. "I intend to ask Bingley for a tour of his grounds. He has not managed an estate before, and if I am to counsel him properly, I need to know the size and state of his property. I wish to include Georgiana. If you will come?"

"I would love to," she replied.

Richard cheered and moved his plate over hers to share another kidney. "We will find a good stretch of field to gallop over."

She poked Richard in the chest. "I will best you today, you will

see."

Miss Bingley stopped arguing with her sister to address them. "I had hoped you would want to spend the day with Louisa and me exploring the shops in Meryton. Surely, you would prefer our company to the gentlemen's." The sarcasm in her tone implied that only a fool would prefer any other company but her own.

Darcy would have credited Miss Bingley with more perception, but the lady's persistence suggested otherwise.

Georgiana, unaccustomed to conflict of any sort, looked between Darcy and Richard, her mouth open but no reply forthcoming.

Richard, quick to recover, covered his hand over his heart as though Miss Bingley's comment had pierced him through. "A harsh cut to imply my dear cousin would wish to avoid the company of her guardians."

Georgiana's eyes widened. "Oh, I could never treat you harshly."

Richard chuckled, and had he been his usual self, he would have put an effective end to Miss Bingley's scheme. But he was not himself. As though recalling his resolution to comport himself with more severity, he fell silent and replaced his smile with a scowl.

Darcy stepped in where Richard had left off. "I am a selfish creature, Miss Bingley, and I must insist that you allow Georgiana to spend the day with us boring gentlemen. The day is suitable for a long ride, whereas a shopping excursion is not hindered by the rain."

Miss Bingley did not look pleased, but when Bingley joined them and commented on the favorableness of the day for a ride over the park, it was decided. She had little choice but to acquiesce.



\* \* \*

They cantered along the east side of the property, reveling in the exercise and the soft warmth of the sunlight glowing between the

clouds. Georgiana, an exceptional horsewoman, controlled her mount beautifully over the unknown terrain, jumping over streams and racing the length of the fallow fields. She did not quite best Richard, but she came perilously close to it.

Bingley pointed ahead to a rise. "That is Oakham Mount, the highest point in the district. Sir William told me it is a popular spot for picnics in the warmer months."

Georgiana urged her horse forward. "A lovely prospect. We shall be able to see for miles around."

Expecting to see landscapes lined with lanes and spotted with copses of trees and grazing animals, Darcy was unprepared to chance upon Miss Lucas, Miss Bennet, and Miss Elizabeth. They stood from the fallen log where they had been sitting to greet them with welcoming smiles.

Bingley wasted no time in dismounting. Richard hesitated but soon followed suit.

To Darcy's relief, the young ladies did not break away from their tightly formed cluster in a blatant attempt to isolate their preferred gentleman's company.

Darcy rolled his eyes at Bingley's eagerness and lifted his hands to help Georgiana. She clasped his shoulders and slid to the ground, saying in a voice meant only for him, "How wonderful to finally be able to meet them! I debated whether I ought to have joined you until the choice was taken away from me, and I have been disappointed in my own timidity since. They are friendly, are they not? Not like ... other young ladies we know?"

The ribbons of Miss Elizabeth's bonnet dangled in the breeze, her sun-kissed cheeks and honey-hued skin bespeaking her love for the out of doors. He recalled her bold conversation of the day before. She had not pandered to his good opinion. She had teased without fluttering her eyelashes or smiling coyly. Perhaps it was because she seemed to care so little for his favor, when he was accustomed to constant fawning, that he felt at ease seeing Miss Elizabeth again. Confidently, he replied, "They are nothing like those other ladies we shall not name. In fact, I do not think you have met *anyone* like them." He handed the groom their reins and pulled Georgiana over to Bingley's neighbors before Georgiana could make any further inquiries.

Miss Bennet listened attentively, and with a great deal of concern, as Bingley assured her that her fears regarding his sister's

injured ankle, while generously given, were hardly warranted. He himself had witnessed her stand from the breakfast table without any difficulty, and he supposed that she had also walked there from her rooms unassisted.

While Miss Bennet gave no indication she suspected anything untoward about Miss Bingley's miraculous healing, the same could not be said for Miss Lucas and Miss Elizabeth, who exchanged a look. Miss Lucas quirked an eyebrow, seemingly at ease in her knowledge and feeling no compulsion to comment on the subject. Miss Elizabeth, on the other hand, bit her lips together, suggesting that silence was more difficult for her. Darcy wondered what she would say, but consideration for his sister's curiosity moved him to introduce her instead.

Tentatively, Georgiana said, "I am pleased to make your acquaintance today where I might have done so yesterday."

Miss Elizabeth's smile spread. "And stand out on the mucky road with the rest of us? Indeed, Miss Darcy, I applaud your good sense for remaining inside the warmer, dryer coach until we could meet under more favorable circumstances." She was kind to use her humor to put Georgiana at ease.

Mid-admiration, Miss Elizabeth's eyes flickered to meet his, and to Darcy's great consternation, he felt his neck warm just as it had the day before. Would she forever associate him with a stubborn mule, an overly enthusiastic dog, and a flying duck egg? It was the sort of thing to remember and, he thought with a shiver, to be recounted at dinner parties to entertain. He, Fitzwilliam Darcy, a man whom nobody laughed at, was the brunt of a joke.

His pride smarted, but his admiration for the impertinent lady and her companions grew. They pulled Georgiana into their circle, asking her opinion of the countryside and treating her like a trusted friend. They did not ignore the gentlemen, but it was to Georgiana they aimed their conversation.

At first, Darcy felt awkward standing at the edge of their group, but when he saw his shy sister laugh and heard her speak above a whisper, he would have stood rooted in that spot all day for the confidence Miss Lucas and the Bennet sisters inspired in her. He would even endure Miss Elizabeth's laughter. Her humor abounded, but he noticed that she was never malicious in its use.

It was Miss Lucas who brought their encounter to an end. Casting her eyes toward the gathering clouds, she pointed out that

they should all return to their respective homes before the rain came. She was a sensible one.

"Allow us to escort you home," Darcy said. Richard and Bingley nodded their support.

Miss Bennet looked appalled. "And expose Miss Darcy to the weather? None of us could forgive ourselves if she suffered a cold as a consequence of our selfish reliance on your gallantry." She was a kind, sensitive one.

"Jane is right. Our mother would love nothing more than to see you escorting us home, but we would not paint you as easy targets to her any more than we would wish you to ride in the rain. Longbourn is not far, and Charlotte can use our carriage to see her comfortably to Lucas Lodge," added Miss Elizabeth, already turning to walk down the hill. There was a sparkle in her eye when she spun to say, "It was lovely to meet you, Miss Darcy. And to see you again, Colonel, Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy."

Was it his imagination, or did her eyes linger on him? Never in his life had a young lady warned him away from a conniving mother or refused any attention he deemed to grant her. His thoughts lingered on Miss Elizabeth during their return to Netherfield Park. And the following day when he suggested another ride to Oakham Mount. And the following week when he ventured out of doors, despite the leaden clouds overhead, in the hope of seeing her again.

# Chapter 8

Elizabeth walked every morning, and when the pleasing prospect of chancing upon their new neighbors was unsuccessful, she walked out many afternoons. However, though she kept to the most-traveled lanes, though she risked getting caught in the rain more than twice, she did not see Mr. Darcy as the days counted down to the Meryton Assembly.



\* \* \*

"Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth said they would be at the assembly, did they not?" Georgiana asked again, pacing nervously at Netherfield's entrance hall before Darcy could reply. "I suppose Miss Lucas will be there. Her father is the Master of Ceremonies. You do think they will all be present this evening, do you not?" She picked at her thumbnail.

Darcy attempted to infuse a calm he did not feel in his voice, though why he should be nervous was beyond his comprehension. He crossed his arms over his fluttering stomach. "They said they would be, and we have no reason to doubt them."

Georgiana's shoulders relaxed, and she turned to face him with a smile. "Oh, I do hope so. I shall not be so anxious if they are there."

Contrary to his sister, the mere mention of the group of ladies including Miss Elizabeth increased Darcy's anxiety exponentially. His throat was too dry to swallow.

His daily rides, often in the rain, had drawn several odd glances from Richard, Bingley, and even Georgiana, but as foolish as he felt, and as many times as he had delayed his departure, convinced of



his folly, he had been unable to stop himself. This lack of self-regulation troubled him greatly.

And yet, he had ridden out every single day in search of this perverse torture. He both dreaded and anticipated the assembly that evening, when two weeks before, he would have been pained to summon any emotion at all surrounding the event. Hours of dodging old gossips, young hopefuls, ambitious mothers and their ever-complaisant daughters, groveling fathers and striving sons, all of them seeking to ingratiate themselves to him. Hours of spiritless conversation and mind-numbing dancing with insincere people with whom he would rather not exchange over two words.

Except for *her*. Miss Elizabeth had not concerned herself over him, preferring to laugh and poke fun at her own mother's ambitions but without demeaning the lady. Nor was she capable of lackluster speech when everything about her crackled and sparkled. Never had Darcy met a young lady whose opinion both captivated and terrified him. Why did he care?

Darcy handed Georgiana into the carriage, and Richard strolled out to join them. He looked as eager to attend the assembly as Darcy usually did.

Twisting to the side to allow him to pass, Georgiana said, "Are you well, Richard? You look ... morose."

At least he would not unwittingly encourage any country maidens until his heart was available for another.

Georgiana leaned forward, peering through the glass as if she might see them through the other side. "I wonder if the Bennet sisters and Miss Lucas will already be at the assembly when we arrive."

Darcy was pleased she had made such fast friends with the ladies but wished she would find some other subject to discuss. His stomach was already in a poor state. He wiped his sweaty palms against his breeches and prepared himself for a long, arduous evening.

Miss Bingley had rested her ankle and declared herself fit for an evening of dancing ... if she condescended to dance at all that evening. Darcy could not imagine her standing up with a man whose hands were stained with dirt and hardened with labor, even if it meant sitting out the rest of the evening. She would expect him to be one of the first to ask her to dance, them being of the same party. The prospect was sobering.

The assembly room was precisely as Darcy had supposed it would be — drab and dingy but loud with merriment and poorly tuned instruments. The assembled crowd quieted when they followed Bingley and his party inside.

Sir William made his way over to them, eager to present them to his neighbors with all the intimacy of a long-lost friend. Darcy thought to observe grasping pomp and presumption. Instead, he found in Sir William a nature so inoffensive, friendly, and obliging, Darcy felt compelled to think more courteously of the gentleman.

Richard bowed curtly, speaking only in clipped sentences.

Georgiana frowned up at Darcy. "I hope he does not overdo it and give cause for offense."

Offense? His sister's assumption that stoic manners offended gave Darcy pause. He looked at Sir William and his cousin, taking note of the contrast. He noticed how eagerly Sir William moved from Richard to Mr. Bingley and how Sir William's dimmed manners brightened when Bingley reciprocated them.

Seeking some sort of middle ground, Darcy managed a smile as Sir William welcomed him, and he was rewarded with Sir William's attention and conversation.

Once he moved back to Bingley, for Darcy would never be as engaging and charming as his younger friend, Darcy peeked over at Richard. His cousin looked coolly about the room, his expression stern and unwelcoming. Leaning closer, Darcy said, "Take care not to carry your change in character too far. You will scare away half of the room and intimidate the other half."

Richard looked at him askance. "You would counsel me on my manners when I am merely doing my best imitation of you? As far as I know, you have yet to have your heart broken, so I would say that a degree of taciturnity will serve me well."

Darcy's forehead tightened. "I am not taciturn."

Richard scoffed in reply.

The muscles tensed at Darcy's jaw. He was not taciturn. He was merely cautious, discerning.

Still, Richard did not display any pleasure in his company. His constant smile was peculiarly absent, and Darcy's concern grew until he recalled their first day in Hertfordshire. Richard had guffawed like a buffoon at his expense. The colonel's change in temperament was half-hearted — inconsistent — and Darcy's patience ceded to anger. *This?* This was how Richard saw him? No

better than a spoiled brat so intent on his own wrongs, he would ruin everyone else's diversion?

Not even when Miss Lucas and the Bennets welcomed them, did Richard yield to politeness.

The longer Richard continued in this disguise, so contrary to his genuine nature, the greater grew Darcy's ire. And when Georgiana turned to him, her eyes brimming with supplication, saying, "William, please do something," Darcy had to act before Richard earned a reputation as the most disagreeable gentleman in attendance at the assembly.

He stepped closer to Richard, lowering his voice. "If you are attempting to imitate me, then you are going about it all wrong."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "To the contrary. I would say I am doing an admirable job."

Darcy glared at Richard. How could he be so mistaken in Darcy's character?

Given little option but to correct his faulty cousin's reasoning, Darcy determined to show Richard precisely how a gentleman would behave in their current situation. And since Richard had proved himself stubbornly errant and doggedly unobservant, Darcy would take pains to ensure his gentlemanly behavior was as obvious as he could make it.

Standing tall and straightening his shoulders, Darcy said coolly, "Then observe and imitate if that is what you must do, but I beg you to at least get it right."

With a smile that was neither overly inviting nor forced, Darcy stepped forward to address the Lucases still lingering nearby. With a bow, he engaged Sir William in conversation and complimented Lady Lucas, who had seen to the decoration of the room. There was little to praise about the space, but what there was, Darcy applauded with all his sincerity.

When that was done and his audience was sufficiently pleased, he turned to Miss Lucas and requested a dance — a dance which Darcy had no doubt she would have preferred to give to Richard if the fool had not been so stingy in his manners.

Georgiana's eyes expressed her gratitude, and that was enough to please Darcy. It was bad enough that he felt hundreds of eyes observing him as he led Miss Lucas to their place on the ballroom floor when his only aim was to move Richard from this solemnity he obnoxiously donned like an ill-fitted coat.

Miss Lucas was a perfectly adequate partner, sensible and easy in conversation, and Darcy danced as elegantly as he had ever done. He contented himself that she enjoyed herself when he left her at her mother's side, and he made his way to the ladies of his party. He would dance with Georgiana first, then Miss Bingley, then Mrs. Hurst, then the clusters of young ladies watching him eagerly, all waiting their turn. Darcy choked back a grimace. It was going to be a long evening.

However, when he heard Richard's deep voice beside him asking Miss Lucas for the next set, Darcy's mood lightened considerably. And he had a dance with Miss Elizabeth to look forward to. He could not forget that.

## Chapter 9

Elizabeth observed Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam with increasing interest. If she did not know better, she would have considered the colonel a foreboding man, too proud for his present company. But his smile came too readily when he thought nobody saw. And she had heard his unrestrained, hearty laughter the day before — the sort that rose from the toes and shook the entire body.

When Mr. Darcy strode to Sir William's side and engaged him in conversation, delighting him and his wife when he requested a dance with Charlotte, Elizabeth caught the twinkle in the colonel's eye, and her budding suspicion was confirmed. Colonel Fitzwilliam was a good man to help his cousin out of the melancholy which must accompany a heartbreak. With the little she knew of Mr. Darcy's character, she did not believe him capable of giving his heart easily or in halves. He would feel his loss acutely, and it was a testament to the strength of his character — and that of the colonel and, Elizabeth was inclined to think, of Mr. Bingley — that he had accompanied the Netherfield Party to the Meryton Assembly at all.

The colonel led Miss Bingley to the dance floor, placing them as far from Mr. Darcy and Charlotte as the size of the room and the placing of the other dancers allowed. However, when she took her place beside them with Mr. Gillet, her frequent peeks revealed that Colonel Fitzwilliam's gaze often strayed to the opposite end of the line to land on Charlotte. Just as Miss Bingley's hawk-eye rarely left Mr. Darcy's elegant form.

Mr. Darcy was an exquisite dancer. He displayed Charlotte — who saw dancing as a practical means by which to encourage affection rather than the diversion most understood it to be — to advantage, engaging her in conversation at every turn and delighting the ladies in the room with a sample of what awaited them when it was their turn.

Elizabeth found herself anticipating her turn, too. She chuckled and skipped around her partner. Poor Mr. Darcy's feet would be very sore by the end of the evening, given the disparity of gentlemen to ladies.

She wondered when he would ask her to dance. Before he wore holes in the soles of his boots, or after? Her thoughts might have lingered on Mr. Darcy longer had there not been so much in her immediate surroundings to observe and ponder.

Mr. Bingley's attention remained on Jane long after their set ended. Elizabeth would not be surprised if he did not request another before the evening was through.

The colonel conversed at length with Charlotte and Sir William, earning satisfied smiles from the first and enthusiastic comments and friendly slaps on the back from the latter.

Jane found Elizabeth during a quadrille she sat out to catch her breath, enjoy some ratafia, and rest her aching toes. Charlotte was not far behind.

Elizabeth teased her friend. "I see you have been enjoying the conversation of a certain gentleman." Over Charlotte's head, Elizabeth saw Mr. Bingley looking very much like a puppy dog longing for a stick to run after ... or a certain young lady to catch. "And you seem to have made quite an impression on Mr. Bingley," she commented to Jane.

Charlotte looked as though she would grin widely, but she suppressed her happiness, pinching her lips to conceal her pleasure. "The colonel is familiar with St. James and will now experience great difficulty extracting himself from my father's company."

"He does not seem to mind, though I believe he would prefer to converse with you more than with your father."

Charlotte quirked her brow, a becoming blush glowing on her cheeks, and turned to Jane. "And what, pray, is your opinion of Mr. Bingley now that you have had the opportunity to speak at greater length with him?"

"Mr. Bingley is everything a gentleman ought to be, all kindness and affability," Jane said, her voice dreamy. "He is an elegant dancer."

"Not so elegant as Mr. Darcy," Charlotte said.

"True, but I felt like a spectacle while dancing with him."

"It is no wonder, with every eye in the room intent on the gentleman. He cannot do anything without it being noticed and commented upon."

How tiresome that would become, always being the center of attention. Always being sought after. Being just as guilty of tracking his motions, Elizabeth changed the subject to ask a question her

companions were in a better position than she was to answer. "What of his conversation?" She did not much like being the only lady in their circle with whom Mr. Darcy had yet to dance, but she could help the time pass by preparing herself.

"I fear I could not relax enough to give him credit," Jane replied.

"Only take care you are not so shy with Mr. Bingley, Jane. Remember that these young men require some encouragement." To Elizabeth, Charlotte said, "I do not think conversing with strangers comes easily to Mr. Darcy." Something over Elizabeth's shoulder distracted Charlotte. She would have turned to see what it was, but Charlotte clasped her hands and said urgently, "Go easy on him, Lizzy."

Behind her, a gentleman cleared his throat. "Miss Elizabeth."

It was Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth twirled around to face him, trying not to look too eager.

He bowed. "May I have the honor of this dance?"

She curtsied. "You may."

A shiver ran up Elizabeth's spine as she rested her hand on Mr. Darcy's arm, and she sensed hundreds of eyes on them along the short walk to the center of the ballroom. She knew her neighbors were only curious, that they meant no harm, but their attention was disconcerting, and her sympathy for Mr. Darcy having to endure an evening under such scrutiny increased all the more.

The music slowed to a country dance. Couples scrambled to take their place higher in the set, leaving only the lower places ... the places which would allow the couples inhabiting them several minutes of conversation before they could join in the figures.

Mr. Darcy's high collars and cravat did not disguise his hard swallow. Was he nervous? After a couple of hours and several partners, did he have any conversation left in him?

"Are you having a pleasant evening, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked. A perfectly proper question for an extraordinarily proper gentleman. Elizabeth applauded his stamina.

Giving him her best conspiratorial grin, Elizabeth said, "I am, thank you, Mr. Darcy. However, I wonder how you are enjoying your evening?"

"I am pleased to make so many new acquaintances."

*Are you really?* Elizabeth wished to ask. "Yes, one cannot help but meet new acquaintances in new places." She shoved her tongue

into her cheek.

His lips twitched. "Indeed."

She could play polite, too. "And do you find the weather in Hertfordshire to your liking?" Next, she would ask about the state of the roads. Or the occupants of Mr. Bingley's stables.

Another twitch, and a glint in his dark eyes. He had captivating eyes. "Aside from the rain, it is tolerable."

"Only tolerable?"

"I would rather be out of doors than inside."

She laughed. "I can find no fault in that. I am very fond of walking."

"I had thought so."

An awkward silence fell between them. Mr. Darcy visibly struggled to find another topic of conversation. Charlotte had been right about him, and after allowing him some moments, Elizabeth could not permit him to suffer any longer. "Mr. Darcy, I appreciate your exertions on my behalf, but after so many partners, you must be fatigued. Would you not prefer simply to enjoy the dance without the expectation of clever conversation and witty retorts?"

She heard his exhale, saw his shoulders relax, heard the relief in his voice when he said a hearty "Thank you."

They enjoyed several moments of comfortable silence after that, and without the pressure of doing what one must, they soon gave in to an easy exchange. She learned that the village nearest to his estate was similar to Meryton — as most villages must be. Not that she could be certain, not having traveled farther than London, but she trusted Mr. Darcy's word on the matter. And she was delighted to learn that his estate was very near to Lambton, the same place where her own dear aunt had been raised. The likelihood that her aunt Gardiner knew something of the Darcys, and would no doubt prove to be a reliable source of information about the family (if not the gentleman standing opposite her himself), lit her curiosity afire.

So pleasant was their discussion, she had difficulty concentrating on the dance steps she otherwise could have done in her sleep when it finally fell to them to participate. Even worse was when the set wound down to a stop, signaling that their dance had come to an end.

Mr. Darcy's gaze did not stray from hers, not even when he bowed. "It was a pleasure, Miss Elizabeth."

She felt the compliment fully. He would not have said it unless



he meant it, she knew. "It was."

He offered her a glass of ratafia, which she declined in favor of rejoining Charlotte and Jane, who sat in a contented cluster conversing with Miss Darcy. Elizabeth's chest filled with pride at how considerate her closest friends were to the young lady. And one look up at Mr. Darcy's tender expression told her that he, too, was grateful for their attention.

Elizabeth's satisfaction was so complete, the heat from Miss Bingley's glare only singed the edges of her consciousness. She knew she had made an enemy of the lady, but at that moment, she could not be moved to care.

# Chapter 10

Darcy had thought to linger at Georgiana's side. He could not help that Miss Elizabeth was presently in her company. Surely, a gentleman could rest for one dance to attend to his young, shy sister ... who at that moment did not look very shy at all.

She acknowledged him with a brief flicker and a nod so slight he might have imagined it, promptly returning her full attention to her newly made friends ... and ignoring him completely. Her easy dismissal of him — her own brother, the one she depended upon for strength — struck Darcy more profoundly than he would ever admit.

He ought to be pleased. He *would* be pleased. With a bow, he dismissed himself from the group of which he had not really been a participant. He passed swiftly past Mrs. Bennet, who boasted loudly of the attentions the newcomers gave her daughters. Darcy cringed. Such talk was the reason he so rarely chose to dance or engage any young lady in conversation. As if to justify his poor opinion further, the youngest Bennets darted by, glancing over their shoulders to ensure they were caught by the young men giving them chase.

Darcy made his way toward the entrance. He was too disturbed by the contrast amongst the Bennets — how could the eldest sisters be so ladylike when the rest of the family acted without restraint? He looked about the room, but Mr. Bennet was nowhere to be seen ... if the gentleman had bothered to come at all. Discouraged by his observations, his thoughts muddled between pride at his sister's boldness and the void it created within him, Darcy decided it best not to dance until he was more himself. He was overheated, footsore, and stunned that the gleam of fun sparkling in Miss Elizabeth's countenance seemed to be branded in his mind's eye. He could not rid himself of it, though he was as far away from her as he could be without retreating out of doors.

The pressure of where her hands had rested against his arm, met his palm during the dance figures, tingled against his skin. He had talked more than he usually did. Conversation with her had felt easy.

Frigid air cooled his cheeks as he passed the opened doors. He checked the time in the dim glow. Country assemblies did not last until the wee hours of dawn as they did in London — a fact for which Darcy was grateful — but another two hours of smiling, dancing, and trivial chatter remained for him to endure. He needed a brief reprieve. Perhaps the darkness would dim the image burning in his brain and tingling against his skin.

Several men huddled around the entrance, singing and swaying their cups in the air. They cheered him as he passed to the clearing between the assembly rooms and the stables where unhitched carriages and carts waited to carry their owners to their beds.

A familiar snicker-bray pulled him in the direction of the paddock to his right. "Good evening, Clarice," he said. She poked her nose over the top of the fence, and he scratched behind her ears.

A cackle behind him made Darcy spin around. Richard and Bingley sat on the edge of an empty cart, dangling their feet in the air and grinning in unison at him.

"Do you mean to ask her to dance, too?" Richard teased.

Darcy grimaced, but he bit back his retort, relieved to see his cousin acting more like his usual self.

Bingley chortled. "That is a sight I would love to see."

Darcy hopped onto the back of the cart beside them, groaning in sweet relief as he flexed and wiggled his toes. Seeing that no lady was overlooked at an assembly was arduous work, and his admiration for his friends, who were both praised for their charm and manners, increased tenfold. Had Richard not challenged his character, Darcy would have found a dark recess in which to observe the residents of their neighborhood from a discreet distance. Not that he would admit as much to Richard.

"What do you think of Bingley's neighbors? No doubt you have made them the subject of study, and we eagerly await your verdict," Richard said.

Both Richard and Bingley watched him. Too intently.

Darcy's eyes narrowed, but he replied with the first opinion to rise to the surface. "So far, I have found your neighbors lively and engaging."

"Lively and engaging?" gasped Richard in disbelief.

Bingley elbowed him. "You see? I told you that no gentleman could be immune to Hertfordshire's charms. I am grateful you agree

with me, Darcy." He waved his open palm in front of Richard's face. "You owe me a guinea."

Richard blustered and shoved Bingley's hand away. "*Who* is lively and engaging?"

Darcy was not about to admit that he had based his response on one young lady whose description of her neighbors had been as enlightening to her character as it was to theirs. Instead, he added fuel to the colonel's dismay. It served him right for betting against him. "Here is one little detail you may find diverting: The owners of the haberdashery are named Burney, but they are not related to the famous authoress. However, that does not prevent Mrs. Burney from implying that the prominent writer has promised in a private letter to call at their favored establishment with signed copies of her novels. The indeterminate date and hour of this event has apparently been arranged since the publication of *Evelina*, however, it tends to resurface whenever Mr. Burney receives a cart of new merchandise from London."

Richard tossed the guinea at Bingley, who caught it smoothly, saying, "What a brilliant plan! After all, it is through no fault of their own that they share a surname with the lady. They might as well use it to draw the curious to their shop."

Darcy nodded. He had already decided he would take Georgiana to the Burneys' shop on the morrow. Perhaps she would find something she liked to remind her of their time at Netherfield Park.

Richard looked like he would burst, though the twinkle in his eye bespoke more pleasure than not. "Do you mean to tell me that you have been dancing and conversing with the greater part of Meryton's female population, and you do not have one complaint or criticism?"

So *that* was what their bet was about? It pleased Darcy to confound his cousin further. "Other than the ache in my feet, I have passed a pleasant evening." To his great surprise, Darcy realized at that moment how true his words were. He had enjoyed the evening more than normal. The bulk of it had gone by more quickly than usual. "But I will be grateful when it is over. I do not know how you do it, talk and dance all evening to a roomful of strangers."

Richard shoved his hand in front of Bingley. "I will take that guinea back."

Bingley shook his head, his jaw open. "When I am wrong, I am wrong. Here it is. Do not spend it all in one place."

Darcy scowled, confused. "Just how many bets did you make on me?"

Tucking the coin into his pocket, Richard replied, "Only the two. That I could make you dance all night, and that you would complain about it. Bingley has a lot more faith in your good humor than I do ... and I was right. You may act however you please now." Richard waved him off dismissively.

Darcy tightened the arms over his chest, and tried to remain cross. Refusing to be goaded, he asked whichever of his two friends wished to provide an answer, "Are you enjoying your evening? Is Meryton everything you thought it would be?"

In a dreamy voice, Bingley said, "Everything and more."

Richard reached over Darcy to shove Bingley on the shoulder. "I see you have fixed your sites on the eldest Miss Bennet. Are you certain it is wise to limit your options before you have met all the ladies in and about the village?"

Bingley sighed. "She is everything gentle and kind."

"Ah," said Richard, "it is no wonder you are attracted to her then, for she reflects the same qualities you display to the utmost degree."

Bingley's brow furrowed. "Do you mean to say that I am only drawn to her because her temperament is a reflection of my own? That I am so enamored with my own character that I seek its reflection in the woman I choose to court?"

Richard shrugged. "I read about it only recently, and now that I have had time to ponder the truth of the claim, I will own that I have observed many men fall for women who flatter their own character. However, I do not believe *your* inclination stems from pride. After all, who would not want a gentle, kind, attentive wife?"

Darcy had always believed that a true love match was a union of contrasts and complements. Of opposites, even. "If such is your belief, then I wonder which of your qualities you seek in your ideal match?"

"I hardly know anymore," Richard said with a chuckle. "Three weeks ago, I would happily have exchanged vows with Miss Honeyfield, pledging her my love, my honor, my devotion. And now, at this moment, if you were to ask me on what I based my blind adoration, all I would be able to do is describe her beauty ... which, interestingly enough, I do not recall being as beautiful as I once thought." He took a deep breath. "I hope I have sense enough

remaining to fall for a rational lady with a level head and a reasonable manner."

Darcy nudged him in the shoulder. "Someone infinitely wiser than you, then?"

Richard's laughter was short. "You are the one who confounds me, Darcy. Before this evening, I would have gone so far as to suggest that Miss Bingley might provide a suitable match."

Darcy shivered. To attach himself to that ... that parvenu? What about her character resembled his own? Was he really so abominable, so haughty and unapproachable? Darcy wished to ask the questions, but he feared the answers.

Bingley cringed. "Caroline would love nothing better, but I like you too much to wish you for a brother, Darcy."

"She would make poor Georgiana more miserable than she is now with all of her attentions and forced intimacies." Richard rubbed his chin, saying absently, "Quite a contrast to the eldest Misses Bennet."

"Miss Elizabeth, too, is charming, though I will admit that much of her humor goes over my head. Much like yours, Darcy." Bingley rubbed his hands together and chuckled. "Now *she* is one to put Caroline in her place. She would sooner laugh at my sister's airs despite Caroline's best attempts to intimidate her. I mean, if she does not cower from laughing at you, Darcy, then I do not believe it possible for her to be intimidated by anyone."

The colonel's eyes crinkled. "I think you are spot on, Bingley. In fact, I am convinced that had they met under more favorable circumstances, Miss Elizabeth would have dismissed Darcy as a haughty prig."

Darcy scoffed. "Anyone who knows me knows better. Our relatives, my close friends, Pemberley's tenants, and every person who has ever worked for me and my family would beg to differ. Tell me, Richard, if I consider myself so far above my company, then why would my servants defend my character against one who ought to know better?" Darcy leaned back, confident he had backed his cousin into a corner.

Richard laughed. "Of course, I understand your character, and you are just as you claim to be ... nothing more, nothing less ... with the people you have permitted more than an aloof acquaintance. It is almost as though you consider that you have reached your limit of close friends and wish for none more, so you

put on this prickly, lofty exterior to discourage anyone from getting close."

What was wrong with keeping his circle small? Surely, Richard, a colonel in the army, did not expect him to blab confidences to every new acquaintance just so others might praise his charm? He was not Wickham. He had gone to pains to prove that over the years.

Reaching over to punch Darcy on the shoulder, Richard said, "Fret not, my taciturn cousin, your secret is safe with us."

"Secret? You know I despise disguise, Richard. Why should my nature be a secret?"

"Do you mean to tell me that had I not pretended to imitate your 'charm,' you would not have stood in a corner and refused to dance with any of the ladies outside your immediate party?"

Darcy scowled. More than anything, he hated being manipulated. Richard knew that, and yet, he admitted to it. Darcy was of a mind to pop him a reminder on the nose, but he would not stoop to such savagery. It would only add fuel to Richard's cause ... whatever that now was. Obviously, he was no longer pining over his beloved Miss Honeyfield.

"Precisely what I thought." The smug expression nearly undid Darcy's resolve, but he held fast, clenching his fists as Richard continued, "Now that you have won the entire village over, you will not be able to slip into your surly moods. You have a reputation as a gentleman to maintain."

"I am always a gentleman."

"You can thank me later."

"For what? For doubting my character and betting against me?"

"For giving a favorable first impression on the fine people of Meryton ... and its surrounding estates." His flippant words dripped with meaning. He referred to the Bennets.

"Why would I wish to leave any kind of impression on Miss Elizabeth? Her father did not bother to attend, her mother is vulgar, and the behavior of her younger sisters is shameful."

"She can no more help the family she was born into than you can. I would argue that the lady's character suits you."

"When everything about her is so remarkably unsuitable? Her family, her lack of fortune and complete absence of connections ... an attachment with such an inferior lady would be a degradation."

The colonel tilted his chin. "And yet, you have learned a great

deal about the lady."

"Not through my own efforts, I assure you."

"Sure. Tell me, Darcy, those words you spoke about Miss Elizabeth — were those the words of a gentleman?" He held Darcy's glare, and it was all Darcy could do to hold his ground when Richard's question hit him like a blow to the stomach. He could hardly breathe. He certainly could not speak.

With a disapproving scowl, Richard turned away, pulling the guinea out of his pocket and shoving it at Bingley. "I no longer wish to keep my prize. Come, Bingley, it has become unbearably frigid out here. Let us return to the assembly where we may grace our social inferiors with our condescension."

Darcy stood, rubbing his hands over his arms against the cold. If this was what a week of reading had led Richard to, then he would do well to stay out of the library.

Clarice brayed and tossed her head in agreement, though whom she agreed with was anyone's guess. Probably Richard. His accusation still stung because he was right. Darcy scoured his brain for a defense, but he had none. He had spoken critically, ungentlemanly. And against a young lady he was growing to admire.

He shivered, alone in the dark, his pride failing him. It would have him spend the rest of the evening miserable and cold and with no company besides a cantankerous mule.



# Chapter 11

Caroline Bingley looked down her straight nose at the dancers bobbing and bounding in front of her, confident that her dress was more becoming than any other lady's in the room. The Bennet and Lucas females wore quality silks and muslins, but *her* gown was of the latest fashion, such as can only be found from the finest modistes in London. Not in this muddy, humdrum village.

Smoothing her hands over her skirts, she watched the doors for Mr. Darcy's return. He had been wise to make his escape while he could, and she would not blame him if he skipped out on the rest of the assembly entirely. Such a tiresome gathering.

She flattered herself that he would return. After his concern over her ankle over the past two weeks, she breathed in expectation of him requesting a second dance. How he had insisted she rest and take care of her injury while he rode over the property with her brother in the drizzle, expressing his anxiety on her behalf as became a true gentleman.

"My poor Duchess, she will be beside herself by now," Louisa fretted at her side, interrupting Caroline's more pleasant thoughts of redecorating Pemberley's main drawing room. All that old furniture must go.

Caroline ignored Louisa. She could not understand why her sister doted on that wretched dog.

"Duchess is not yet a year old; she is only a puppy, really. Oh, my poor little muffin, all alone in an unfamiliar house..." Louisa continued until Caroline could ignore her simpering no longer.

"You coddle her too much," she snapped. "She will be perfectly well without you."

Louisa refused to be comforted. So, with a deep sigh, Caroline resumed her watch on the entrance doors. Just off to the side, a welcome sight awaited her. Miss Elizabeth was pulling her youngest sister off the arm of a young man. The other younger sister, the one who seemed to be either coughing or giggling, was presently tittering and sipping from her punch. Were they drunk? How delightful!

Miss Elizabeth's eyes sparked with disapproval, but her two younger sisters were too senseless, or too much in their cups, to understand her rebukes. They pulled away to join another pack of young men eager to flirt with the coquettes.

Miss Elizabeth crossed her arms in front of her, her complexion deepening. Her eyes wandered over the room. If she looked for further assistance from her parents, she would be sorely disappointed. As far as Caroline understood, Mr. Bennet had not bothered to appear at the assembly, and not a quarter of an hour before, Caroline had observed Mrs. Bennet swinging her feet from her chair, surrounded by empty glasses of punch, and vociferously declaring the good fortunes of her eldest daughters merely because they had secured dances with Mr. Darcy and Charles. As if they had a chance of securing anything more than a partner for a country reel.

Caroline crossed the room, her gaze fixed on Miss Elizabeth, who dared to meet her look with a challenge. Caroline met it confidently. She did not have a family whose brazen conduct shrouded her name in shame. "Miss Elizabeth, your younger sisters are so ... lively."

The lady lifted her chin defiantly.

Caroline smiled. She would love to cut this country chit at the knees and rub her face in the folly of her heightened opinion of herself. If she thought she had a chance with Mr. Darcy, she was delusional. It would be a kindness to illuminate her.

"Are you enjoying the assembly, Miss Bingley?" Miss Elizabeth asked with a touch too much bite to be polite.

Caroline was now. "Well enough, I thank you. I am curious to know which of the young ladies present is the most accomplished, so that I may encourage Miss Darcy's friendship with them? She is quite shy and relies on my guidance. We are close friends, you know. Practically sisters," she added, letting Miss Elizabeth think what she would. Caroline was confident of her place in Mr. Darcy's affection.

Tilting her chin and arching her brow in an expression she, no doubt, considered charming, Miss Elizabeth said, "What do you mean by accomplished? There are many accomplishments a young lady may claim, but not everyone will agree that such accomplishments recommend her."

Miss Bingley fluttered her fingers in the air. How stupid could

she be to request such an explanation? "Oh, the essentials. Surely, you know those: dancing, languages, instruments, drawing and painting, a certain special manner, an air in her way of walking..."

Miss Elizabeth had the audacity to smile at her. "I do not know of any such lady, but if I meet one, I shall be sure to recommend her to you."

Caroline gasped, feigning shock. "An appalling admission, to be sure. Mr. Darcy is a proud man from the first circles. He bears much responsibility to maintain his status, to live up to the consequence of his family's name and the exalted position into which he was born. He seeks the best association for his sister." She watched Miss Elizabeth closely, but the lady's eyes did not narrow, nor did her complexion flush as Caroline had expected. In fact, to an onlooker, she seemed to be full of humor.

"Then his stay here will be an education, Miss Bingley. And while I thank you for the information regarding Mr. Darcy's status and position, I do not see how that has anything at all to do with me. I have no intention of scaling the pedestal you have placed him on." She looked over Caroline's shoulder. "Mr. Hilbert, I saw that Sir William presented you to Miss Bingley and her brother earlier. How pleasant to see you."

Caroline felt her shoulders tense. She had been so distracted by the impertinent miss who refused to take any of her hints, she had not noticed the grubby farmer creep up to them.

He bowed and asked Caroline to dance. She frowned at him in her most regal air, but she could not refuse, for a refusal would mean she would have to sit out the remainder of the dances, and she had yet to secure a second dance with Mr. Darcy.

She mumbled her assent and hovered her hand over the dirty farmer's arm.

Miss Elizabeth's smile hardened. "You are fortunate, Mr. Hilbert. Miss Bingley is an elegant dancer. She is so very accomplished."

Temper struggled with composure, and Caroline's will not to allow this country upstart any leverage over her emotions persevered, but only by a hair's breadth. Who did that groping nobody think she was? What could she possibly have that Caroline herself did not? What could she do that Caroline could not easily surpass?

She tried to ignore her partner as well as she could, discouraging conversation with brief, curt replies. She saw her brother enter the

assembly room and walk in a direct line to Miss Bennet. Again.

Caroline seethed. That fool would fall for any pretty face. She must discourage an attachment if she had any hope of encouraging Mr. Darcy to declare himself to her. There were simply too many disadvantages from a connection to such a scandalous family.

The colonel followed behind Charles, but he stopped to join the Lucases, who were entertaining Miss Darcy (with boring stories of St. James, no doubt. Caroline had only spent a few minutes with Sir William, but she had heard her fill).

Between watching her brother, wondering if a flirtation with Colonel Fitzwilliam would inspire jealousy in his cousin, and watching the entrance door for Mr. Darcy, Caroline was occupied. The dance ended, mercifully, and she extracted herself from the farmer before he had a chance to offer to fetch a glass of punch for her.

That dreadful butcher walked in her direction. But just then, Mr. Darcy returned, his intense gaze searching the crowd. He must be looking for her. She would make his search easy.

Sauntering over to his side, Caroline wrapped her hand around his arm and leaned in to whisper in his ear. "If you are looking for civilization, you will have to return to London. Not a quarter of an hour ago, I witnessed Miss Elizabeth prying her tipsy youngest sister off the arm of a young rake in a red coat. Hardly the sort of acquaintance you would wish for Miss Darcy. I have done my best to protect her, but I find my brother's neighbors sorely lacking." She looked up into his dark eyes, waiting for his approval.

"Any lady who cares for her sister to protect and guide her when her efforts draw criticism upon herself is worthy of admiration, not scorn." He extracted his arm from her grip and departed without another word or a request to stand up with him a second time.

Caroline huffed, her ire boiling over as she observed him walk over to the very family she had maligned. Mrs. Bennet tittered and snapped her fan shut when he bowed and extended his hand to the plain daughter with the spectacles.

Slowly sucking in a breath, Caroline calmed herself. She might have succeeded had Miss Elizabeth not caught her eye. What she would give to wipe that smirk from her face! Caroline had never disliked a lady as much as she detested Elizabeth Bennet. She would have to show her who was superior.

Miss Elizabeth would get her just deserts served to her on a

silver platter. Caroline could hardly wait to witness her downfall.

# Chapter 12

Mrs. Burney clucked in circles about Darcy and Georgiana like a mother hen intent on showing off her newest chicks — er, wares. "You simply must see the fabric arrived only this morning from London. There is a satin that will look lovely against your delicate, porcelain complexion, Miss Darcy. Not to mention how the blue muslin will bring out the blue of your eyes. Like cornflowers. Simply lovely."

When she paused for a breath, Darcy asked, "If it is no trouble, might we see the fabrics?"

He did not need to ask again. In a blink, Mrs. Burney bustled to the back of her shop, talking all the way. Darcy was grateful he had stolen Georgiana away to Meryton, so she could enjoy some shopping without the snide remarks of Bingley's sisters.

"Did you enjoy the assembly?" he asked.

She clasped her hands together by her chin. "Oh, yes. Everyone was so friendly and welcoming, I almost felt as though I was at Pemberley."

"Then you approve of Bingley's choice of Netherfield Park?"

"He is fortunate in his neighbors."

"I am glad you enjoyed yourself."

Mrs. Burney returned, draping the samples piled in Mr. Burney's arms over the counter.

Darcy tried to be interested for his sister's sake, but as Mrs. Burney and Georgiana sorted through the colors and textures, holding up one after another to his sister's face, he struggled not to let his mind wander. As far as he was concerned, all of them complemented his sister. She was so pretty, she could have worn a brown flour bag and still drawn admiring looks.

Holding up the uppermost samples from the mound of colors piled on the counter, Georgiana asked, "Which is best?"

Mrs. Burney bunched her chin. "The pink satin has a lovely sheen in the sun or candlelight. But the printed blue muslin is stunning."

Georgiana turned to Darcy. "They are so different. Which do you

think, William?"

Taking the lengths from her, he said, "I think you are a much better judge than I am. I also think there is too much shade at the counter for you to see well enough to properly choose." Draping the satin over one shoulder and the muslin over his other, he walked over to the glass door and windows to give her a better look.

He rarely succumbed to spontaneity, but he was glad he had when his sister giggled.

Mrs. Burney nodded her approval. "Such an attentive brother. You are blessed, Miss Darcy."

Applauding himself for his thoughtfulness, Darcy froze in place when the bell above the shop door jingled to admit a new customer.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," Mrs. Burney greeted.

Darcy pressed his eyes closed, his face heating. Taking a deep breath, he slowly spun around.

Miss Elizabeth's smile crinkled all the way up to her eyes. "The light blue does little to complement your complexion, Mr. Darcy. The pink, however, is surprisingly flattering."

Laughter burst forth from the bottom of Darcy's belly, his embarrassment distilled with humor and shared with his sister and the shopkeepers.

"What brings you into Meryton so early the morning after an assembly, Miss Elizabeth?" he inquired. He noticed the book she held in her hand. The title was hidden under her grip.

"It is a custom for everyone who is anyone to gather at my aunt Philips' after the assembly to exchange gossip. My sisters are there now, but I wished to replace my shoe roses. They were trampled beyond repair last night." She slipped the book onto the counter. "I also wished to return this and inquire if you have received any new books for the circulating library." She looked hopefully at Mrs. Burney, who looked suddenly very uncomfortable.

"Hardly anything of note," she replied vaguely, her gaze flickering between Miss Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Darcy.

He imagined a stack of vulgar novels, the kind most ladies never admitted to reading, hidden behind a stack of sermons and more edifying tomes.

Miss Elizabeth must have had a similar thought. "Pray tell me that the dreadful gothic novel I have been longing to read has finally arrived."

Darcy could not help but smile. He did not care what a lady

selected to read, so long as she was honest about it.

Mrs. Burney nodded. "Along with several edifying pamphlets for young ladies."

Miss Elizabeth's tone was serious, but the perennial glint in her eye never dimmed. "Mrs. Burney is kind enough to ensure that all of her customers have a wide variety of literature from which to select. I, for one, will not pretend that I do not enjoy the novels as much as — and usually more than — the educational tomes meant to improve the mind."

A discussion about Frances Burney's novels ensued, which led to several comparisons of their favorites.

Darcy enjoyed the lively picture before him. It reminded him of a similar discussion he had enjoyed with Bingley upon inspecting his library. Bingley preferred Shakespeare's sonnets, (those being of a length more convenient to him) while Darcy praised the wordsmith's many comedies and tragedies. Since then, Darcy had observed Miss Bingley carrying volumes of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Romeo and Juliet* from room to room. Whether she actually read them, he could not say, though he was inclined to think she used them more as an accessory than a way to pass the time pleasantly.

"Do you like Shakespeare?" asked Georgiana.

"It depends," Elizabeth replied. "I would rather laugh than cry."

That, Darcy could imagine. "He wrote many comedies. Do you have a favorite?" he asked.

Without batting an eyelash, she replied, "*Much Ado About Nothing*. The ne'er-do-wells get their just deserts, and all of my favorite characters marry for love."

Georgiana swayed on her feet. "I like to think Claudio and Hero live happily for the rest of their lives."

Elizabeth leaned closer to her. "I feel the same about Benedick and Beatrice. Their merry war of wits is bound to contribute to their felicity."

Perhaps one act of spontaneity led to another. There was no other explanation for why Darcy opposed her view when he had argued to the contrary after dinner several nights before. "You do not think their conversation too volatile to allow for true happiness? Beatrice is cynical and sharp."

"She is only protecting herself. What else is left for a woman of strong character, who prizes her liberty, to do but scare away the



weak gentlemen who would only try to control her and break her spirit?"

Just as Darcy believed, yet he prodded, "Benedick is a willful character. Would he not do the same?"

"Not when he complements her so well. He rises to her challenge. They are intellectual equals, and it is in each other that they finally find a worthy partner. He respects her too much to change her, and she falls in love with him as he is. And yet, they inspire each other to improve. Theirs is a deep love more would do well to imitate."

Georgiana looked askance at Darcy, her look saying *I thought you argued the same, too*, but she was too polite to say so aloud.

Darcy was about to agree with Miss Elizabeth's assessment when the door to the shop burst open to admit her two youngest sisters. "The officers are coming!" Miss Lydia squealed.

Georgiana stiffened.

They blabbed on without taking a breath, "Aunt said that Uncle has already met Colonel Forster. They are expected to arrive any day now. Officers, officers as far as the eyes can see!"

Miss Elizabeth steered her sisters away from Georgiana, casting an apologetic glance over her shoulder. "Pray save some of your enthusiasm for Mama. She will be thrilled to hear your news."

"Oh, but we cannot return to Longbourn before we see the new bonnets at the milliner's shop," Miss Lydia said.

"Please come with us, Lizzy. And you, too, Miss Darcy," Miss Kitty said.

Darcy was prepared to remain behind with Georgiana, but she surprised him by accepting their invitation. Then, quietly, to him, she added, "He could be in any regiment anywhere in the country. What is the likelihood that he should come here? I will not live in fear of chancing upon him."

So happy was Darcy to hear his spurned sister's bravery in the threat of facing their old foe, he quickly made arrangements for Georgiana's purchases to be delivered to Netherfield and joined her and the Bennet sisters to the tune of Mrs. Burney's "Lovely, simply lovely." She might have been celebrating her sale or complimenting the ladies. Darcy could not be certain, but he now understood the danger Miss Elizabeth presented to him in view of his growing admiration.

# Chapter 13

Elizabeth wrapped her arm around Georgiana's, shielding her from Kitty and Lydia's excited talk of officers and allowing time for them to trounce ahead. She did not have to understand the reason behind Georgiana's uneasiness to know that the mention of officers made her nervous. She felt Mr. Darcy's look on her back. Was he disapproving? Grateful? She dared not turn to see his face, nor did she know him well enough to read his expressions, so she straightened her shoulders and changed the subject. "Does Lambton have a milliner?"

The window of bonnets was advantageously placed on the corner of the main road connecting their village to London. Across the street was the butcher's shop. Clarice was tied to the post outside the paddock housing Mr. Gillet's pigs and poultry. She flipped her ears and nibbled at the green grass on her side of the fence, seeming to converse with the pig enjoying its slop in the trough on the other side.

She brayed in their direction, and if Elizabeth did not know how preposterous it was, she would have sworn that Clarice was offering her salutations directly to Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder in time to see him tipping his hat to the mule. Miss Darcy giggled under her hand. Elizabeth was not so gracious. She laughed aloud, her joy overflowing when Mr. Darcy held his head up with all the dignity of a man caught paying his respects to a mule.

Clarice's ears straightened, her bray sounding like an alarm.

Elizabeth dabbed at her eyes to see Jenny, the youngest of one of her father's tenant families, running barefoot through the packed mud, half of a browning apple extended in her hand to Clarice.

Looking about anxiously for the dog, Elizabeth called out to the girl. "Take care your puppy does not startle Clarice."

"I tied her up, Miss Lizzy." Clarice plucked the apple off her palm, allowing Jenny to wrap her arms around her neck, but her neck stiffened and she lifted Jenny off the ground when she raised her head and looked further up the road, her ears rotated forward.

What Clarice heard made itself visible. A man raced up the road at a full gallop — a flash of red — his heels flailing in and out, spurring his horse onward harder.

Who did he think he was riding so fast into the village? He could trample someone, or his horse could be startled by any of the dogs that liked to hang around Mr. Gillet's shop. It was foolhardy at best.

"Jenny, stay where you are," Elizabeth said, already crossing the street, an image of the girl running in front of the heedless rider hurrying her step.

Jenny did as she was bid, staying at the edge of the road with Clarice.

A yelping bark echoed above the pounding of hooves. Rounding the corner of the milliner's shop bounded Jenny's dog, dragging a frayed rope behind it, and heading straight for Jenny. Straight across the path of the speeding horse.

Clarice reared back, and Jenny lunged at the rider, screaming, "Evie!"

The rider's eyes must have been blurry from his pace, or else he might have recognized his trouble sooner. His horse bucked and twirled, sending the man flying. He landed on top of Mr. Gillet's fence, bringing the entire structure down with him and promptly ending the pig's meal with a loud *splat-crack* as the trough parted down the middle, spilling the contents over the white breeches and red coat of the rider.

Mr. Darcy passed her, reaching for the horse's reins and pulling the scared animal to the other side of the road. The greater danger out of the way, Elizabeth put an arm around Jenny, pulling her close while the little girl cried and held her puppy.

Mayhem surrounded them from the animal pen, as its occupants took advantage of their newfound freedom. Georgiana, Kitty, and Lydia chased chickens. Mr. Gillet and his nephew did their best to block the pigs from tramping through the village square. Clarice soon found her way to the milliner's flower boxes, helping herself to the delectable blooms, a piece of wood fencing dangling from the rope tied to her halter. Jemima the Duck waddled out of the pen, adding her quack to the melee.

The distraught girl trembled under Elizabeth's hand, her tears soaking into her pet's fur.

Pulling her over to Clarice's recently vacated spot, Elizabeth dropped to her knees. "Now, let us see how Evie fares."

"That man trampled her. He rode right over the top of her," whimpered Jenny, shooting the soldier a glare.

"Now, see here!" the man said, looking ridiculous trying to stand from the trough, covered in pig slop. "If my horse was injured because of you or your dog, I will see that your father pays. A right valuable horse he is, too. Will cost him a pretty penny."

Elizabeth handed the dog to Jenny. If it had suffered any injuries, they were not apparent. Unlike the damage she wished to wreak on this hot-headed, poor-excuse-of-a-man who breathed threats on a little girl. Rising to her feet, Elizabeth planted herself between him and Jenny. "You will do no such thing when you brought this accident upon yourself. This is a market village. People and animals mill about without greater concern for their safety because riders with a modicum of sense know to slow their pace upon reaching the village edge."

"I am a messenger for Colonel Forster."

A deep voice behind her answered. "And I will take it upon myself to inform your superior of your reprehensible behavior, not only your lack of respect for the safety of Meryton's residents but your lack of manners to a young lady of gentle birth and your eagerness to bully a defenseless child."

Elizabeth nodded, adding her support to Mr. Darcy's eloquent set down.

He walked around them, handing the reins of his calmed mount to the blustering fool, and saying, "I suggest you make yourself presentable before you are seen by Colonel Forster. The horse is sound, but his gums are raw from your mishandling. You ran him too long and too hard — another detail I shall add to my report to the colonel. Mr. Gillet will be along shortly with an assessment of the damage you have caused to his property."

At his feet, Jemima wiggled her tail feathers and squawked her complaints, walking away and leaving an egg by Mr. Darcy's boot.

The young man took the reins and slunk off.

Mr. Gillet and his nephew tied the posts together as best as they could. Several of the villagers helped Kitty, Lydia, and Georgiana to confine the strays abusing their freedom from their pen.

Mr. Darcy lowered himself to Jenny's level. "Let us have a look at your puppy," he said gently. "What is her name?"

Jenny sniffed. "Evie."

"Evie is a lovely name."

"It is short for Evelina. But that's too much to say, so I shortened it to Evie." Deciding she liked Mr. Darcy, Jenny handed over her dog.

Gently laying the puppy on the ground, where she immediately rolled onto her back for a belly rub, paws kicking in the air, Mr. Darcy chuckled and obliged her with a good rub. "Evie seems to be unscathed." Turning to the girl, he asked, "Can the same be said for you?" He pointed at a purple bruise on her wrist.

She lifted up her hand proudly for them to see better. "This little thing? That's nothing. My brother bet me I couldn't climb the sycamore higher than he could." She grinned, revealing two black voids where her front teeth had been. "I showed him!"

"That will show him to doubt you, young lady. However, as capable as you are, I beg you to take greater care not to run between carriages and in front of horses. Will you do that please?" The duck, who once again milled about Mr. Darcy's feet, quacked her concern.

Jenny dug the toe of her boot into the ground, dragging it in circles. "I promise."

Mr. Darcy nodded. "I trust you are a young lady of your word." With that, he rose and brushed his hands against his coat. "That bruise needs to be seen by a surgeon."

Jenny's eyes doubled in size. "I don't need no help. My pa says I'm as strong as any boy."

Elizabeth calmed the girl, placing her hand on Jenny's shoulder. "Meryton has no surgeon. The closest is at Harpenden. Mrs. Hill gets a salve from the — she has a salve which will help Jenny." She bit her tongue before she revealed that she and her sisters' injuries were treated by a salve Longbourn's housekeeper purchased from the farrier. It was sticky and smelly, but it worked wonders (and made their hands incredibly soft).

Kitty and Lydia forgot to go inside the milliner's. The hullabaloo outside the shop was much more entertaining as the milliner faced off against Mr. Gillet, her fingers pointing at her now bare flower boxes.

Miss Darcy brought them over to their motley party, practically bouncing with excitement. "I am happy no greater injury befell anyone, although I daresay the young soldier's pride took a severe blow. I have not had so much fun since ... since ... since I cannot remember when!"

"Miss Bingley will be sorry she missed the diversion. Do you think we can convince her that not all of the fun is to be had in London?" Elizabeth teased.

Lydia giggled. "Miss Bingley is so stuffy, I wonder how she sees past her own nose."

"Lydia!" Elizabeth warned. What her sister said was probably true, but there were certain things a lady did not say aloud.

"I would rather stay here than anywhere else in the world!" Jenny said.

Elizabeth felt for the girl. Evidently, her father had made a decision his daughter did not like. "We will miss you, Jenny."

Jenny sniffed. "Papa says Evie can go with me, so I don't miss my brothers so much." She wiped her nose with her sleeve. "Thank you for the baskets, and please thank Miss Jane for the velvet coat." She went to wipe her nose again, but Mr. Darcy handed her his handkerchief before she could leave another trail of snot on her sleeve.

Lydia squealed, "She gave that to *you*?"

Kitty jabbed her in the ribs, asking Jenny, "Why are you not wearing it? It is dreadfully cold."

"Papa didn't want me to ruin it before I leave. It really is fine."

Before Lydia could attempt to pry the one fine garment the girl owned away from her, Elizabeth said, "Well, I envy you the adventure you are soon to have. Think of the new friends you will make, and your aunt and uncle who will love you as their own." Jenny's father had assured her that his sister was a kindly woman with a steady husband. They owned a bakery, and having no children of their own, they had been happy to offer to take Jenny off his hands for as long as he could spare her company.

Jenny grinned. "Papa says I will get to eat as much bread as my belly can hold. My brothers are jealous, all of them!"

Elizabeth tucked a piece of straw-blonde hair behind the girl's ear. "Then I am truly happy for you, Jenny. You shall be so plump and rosy the next time I see you, I shall not recognize you."

Handing Mr. Darcy's soiled handkerchief back, which he insisted she keep with his compliments, she tucked the dirty linen into her pocket and reached out to take Evie's rope from Mr. Darcy, exposing her bruised wrist. "I should go on home before Papa notices I've gone."

"Does Mrs. Hill have enough salve to spare, or would it be more

prudent to purchase some?" he asked.

Lydia blurted, "You can ask Mr. Herriot for more. Mrs. Hill swears by it."

Elizabeth's face lit on fire. She could not rid herself of her sisters quickly enough. "Why do you not return to Aunt Philips? Jane and Mary will worry if they do not see you at the haberdashery."

They departed with promises to purchase ribbon for Mrs. Hurst's "sweet, little dog" as well as for Evie, so that she might look her best for Jenny's aunt and uncle. They invited Miss Darcy to accompany them, but it was clear that Miss Darcy preferred to remain with her brother than to traipse off with Lydia and Kitty. It was for the best, Elizabeth thought. The disparity between her youngest sisters' behavior and Miss Darcy's was too great to encourage a friendship in that quarter. Mr. Darcy was certain to disapprove of them.

That gentleman still waited, albeit rather impatiently, Elizabeth thought, for her reply. Her face lit aflame again. He would have connected the dots between the farrier and Mrs. Hill's favorite salve by now.

Proving himself an exceptional gentleman, he said nothing more on the subject, though she noticed the quirking of his lips. "To Mr. Herriot's then?"

Jenny led the way, tripping over her feet in her haste and frequent turns to see that Mr. Darcy followed.

He handed Mr. Herriot several coins, more than enough for a jar of salve for Jenny to take home, as well as an examination to ensure the puppy was in good health. He also sent a boy to fetch Jenny's brother from the stables where he worked, as it began to rain heavily, and he did not wish for the girl to catch her death or to be alone.

Content Jenny was staying dry with her brother, and that Kitty and Lydia would be in Aunt Philips' warm parlor by now, it only remained for Elizabeth to make her way home. It also became apparent that Mr. Darcy took responsibility for her ... just as he had for Jenny, her puppy, and, now that she thought about it, anyone who happened to require assistance within his hearing. Elizabeth did not need his help, nor did she wish to impose, but not once did he make her feel like a burden. To the contrary.

He had his carriage brought around, and Elizabeth pondered how she could reasonably refuse the conveyance. She could not remain behind at the farrier's. She would be drenched by the time

she reached Aunt Philips' house. It was raining too hard to justify walking in it.

When the coachman opened the door and Mr. Darcy moved to assist her inside, allowing Elizabeth a glimpse of the brushed velvet and polished leather interior, she dug in her heels. "My gown is muddy." She pointed at the spots at her knees where she had knelt on the ground by Jenny, feeling as stubborn and irrational as Clarice.

Mr. Darcy brooked no argument. "You cannot walk in this rain."

"Longbourn is very near. Only one mile." He must think her daft. She certainly felt it.

"A mile more easily traveled in a dry carriage."

She knew better than to argue, but her stained gown was not the only impediment in her mind. She felt it necessary to warn Mr. Darcy. "My mother will see me arrive with you in your carriage—"

"And my sister. There is hardly anything untoward in that—"

"She will make assumptions." Elizabeth bit her lips together, her cheeks hot.

Mr. Darcy's dark eyes met hers. "Miss Elizabeth, I cannot in good conscience leave you in this weather when I have a perfectly functional carriage at my disposal. Not for one moment have we been unattended, nor has anything compromising transpired. I am not afraid of Mrs. Bennet's assumptions."

"I warned you. Pray remember that."

He nodded.

Taking a breath full of resignation, Elizabeth climbed inside the carriage, her misgivings increasing the scant mile to Longbourn.



# Chapter 14

Mama was delighted.

Elizabeth could practically see her mother planning the wedding, and Elizabeth's cheeks burned anew in the knowledge of her own enjoyment of Mr. Darcy's care. It was pleasant to be the object of anyone's concern when she, like Jane, was so often relied upon to see to everyone else's welfare. If she did not know Mr. Darcy's circumstances, of his recent heartbreak, Elizabeth would have considered her own heart in greater danger. Mr. Darcy was everything she most admired in a gentleman: kind, gentle, and attentive to those whom other men in his position considered beneath their touch; bold and unyielding when demanding justice. Elizabeth had no doubt he would speak to Colonel Forster. In all things, he was responsible, quick to follow through.

Mama ushered them into the drawing room, and Elizabeth up the steps to her bedchamber to change her gown and wash up.

To Elizabeth's surprise, the Darcys were still there when she descended some minutes later, eating cake and listening to her mother's chatter.



\* \* \*

One, ensure Miss Elizabeth's safe arrival to Longbourn.

Two, depart for Netherfield Park, content he had done what he could without exposing himself to the other Bennets.

That had been Darcy's plan. Until Mrs. Bennet.

Darcy had believed himself capable of extricating himself and his sister from any unwanted call, but Mrs. Bennet did not cease

talking long enough for him to bid their adieus. He bade his time politely, waiting for her to take a breath. But the woman had the unnatural ability to speak without stopping for air.

"My mother's plum cake was famous...", she plumped the pillows at the end of the settee, where she motioned for them to sit, talking all the while, "...and I had Cook bake some today. It ought to be cooled by now, and I will own that after all morning of smelling it, I am ready to partake of a slice. I daresay Mr. Bennet is, too, for all that I believe he married me to secure my mother's recipe. Where is Mr. Bennet?" she asked nobody in particular as she disappeared from the drawing room.

Darcy nudged Georgiana. "Ought we make our escape now?"

Georgiana's eyes widened. "You are not serious, William! How could we possibly leave when she is so determined to be hospitable?"

Darcy winced, but he remained seated. He could not disappoint Georgiana when she was decided.

Mrs. Bennet's chatter preceded her return to the drawing room, followed by Mr. Bennet and two servants bearing tea trays.

"You are in for one of life's greatest pleasures, Mr. Darcy. You could not have timed your visit more advantageously." Mr. Bennet rubbed his hands together, his eyes on the slices of cake his wife passed around.

Mr. Bennet accepted his plate. "Thank you, Mrs. Bennet. And thank you, Mr. Darcy, for conveying my daughter safely to us. Her constitution, I am pleased to say, is as stout as her mind, but nobody likes to get caught in a downpour."

Richard had said something similar about him. Darcy knew Georgiana was thinking the same when he felt her gaze on him. "I am glad to hear it," he mumbled.

Mr. Bennet had already eaten half of his cake. "Come, Mr. Darcy, I cannot very well ask for another slice when you have yet to taste your first."

Mrs. Bennet scolded the unrepentant Mr. Bennet, and Darcy lifted the plate from the table.

Georgiana said under her breath, "It really is delicious."

Eyes on the door for Miss Elizabeth's return, resolved once again to take their leave as soon as they ate their cake and bid their farewells, Darcy took a bite.

Darcy's eyes closed, and Mrs. Bennet's chatter faded. For one

glorious moment, he was in heaven, at his aunt's table when he was only a lad. He rolled the flavor in his mouth, savoring the perfect blend of butter, sugar, candied fruit, liqueur, and juicy plums. His heart sighed contentedly under the sheer delight of a perfectly baked plum cake the likes of which he had not tasted in well over a decade.

It was divine.

Mrs. Bennet eventually interrupted his bliss. "Mr. Bennet! How can you take another piece before our guests have finished their first?"

Opening his eyes, Darcy caught Mr. Bennet's remorseful look. Lifting up his empty plate, the gentleman said, "Good enough to warrant a proposal of marriage, is it not, Mr. Darcy?"

"I would say so."

Mrs. Bennet sat forward in her chair, seizing her opportunity. "I intend to pass the recipe to my daughters when they marry."

Darcy had walked into that one, and he could not blame Mrs. Bennet for exploiting his error. Miss Elizabeth *had* warned him.

That same lady entered the room then, the blush in her cheeks suggesting she had overheard her mother's remark. Miss Elizabeth was embarrassed, but he did not want her to be ashamed on his account. How many times had his own Aunt Catherine embarrassed him in front of company? He could not allow her suffering to continue.

She avoided him until she sat with her tea and cake. He smiled at her. *You did warn me.*

The twinkle of mischief returned to Miss Elizabeth's eyes, replying *Yes, I did, and now you know how you brought this upon yourself.*

He arched a brow in acknowledgment, which she graciously accepted with restrained laughter. Darcy thought he had never seen a smile so lovely.

# Chapter 15

Caroline Bingley pressed her fingers against her temples. Her headache had begun four days before and had worsened with every retelling of that Bennet hoyden's defense of a scroungy farmer's daughter, and even worse, how Mr. Darcy had come to her aid.

The servants at Netherfield Park were abuzz about it. Miss Darcy spoke of nothing else, no matter how diligently Caroline tried to draw her beyond her interest in Miss Elizabeth.

Even Louisa had fallen under her spell. However, Louisa had always preferred animals to people, so Caroline could excuse her misplaced judgment.

Needing an escape from the chatter, Caroline had taken the carriage into Meryton with Louisa and Mr. Hurst, but the village offered no respite. To the contrary. In a village so insignificant, they had little else to talk about but how well Mr. Darcy had stood up for one of their own with that interloper at his side.

Caroline had hoped that the Sunday services would provide relief, but Miss Elizabeth was praised along with Mr. Darcy from the pulpit during the sermon on displays of brotherly love and the neighborly Samaritan.

It was enough to make any lady ill. Caroline pushed her repast away from her, the ham and cheese untouched. She ought not to fret over that frustrating female when Mr. Darcy sat across from her at the tea table. Her exertions were better spent promoting her own interests rather than fretting over a squire's daughter so unsuitable for a man such as Mr. Darcy as to be laughable.

Miss Darcy said, "I would like very much to call at Longbourn on the morrow, if you can spare the time, to see what news Miss Elizabeth has of Jenny and Evie."

"Excellent idea," her brother replied.

Charles, too, seized the opportunity to join them, stating his concern over the little girl and her dog when everyone in the room knew he only wished to admire Miss Jane Bennet.

How could none of them see how foolhardy Miss Elizabeth was to defend a country urchin likely to end up at the workhouse?

Caroline would never do such a thing. She took greater care not to stoop to such indignities. Protecting an ungrateful nobody, shielding her from an officer's wrath, and keeping the girl from running under a horse to save her wretched pet. Would that the horse had trampled Miss Elizabeth! "So careless, running in front of that awful, mangy animal for a miserable creature," Caroline muttered.

She had not thought she had been overheard until the talk quieted around the table.

Mr. Darcy's voice was level and low. "That awful, mangy animal might have trampled that miserable creature. Thanks to Miss Elizabeth's quick action, the child suffered no harm."

Caroline raised her hand to her chest, her fingers fluttering. "Oh my, did you think I referred to that poor, innocent child? I clearly meant the dog." Looking to Louisa for support, she added, "It pains me to see families who can barely feed themselves take other creatures under their care. The puppy cannot be receiving sufficient nourishment and must, indeed, be quite miserable."

Louisa gasped. "I shall assemble a basket for the poor thing."

"I should think a basket for the family is more appropriate than one for their dog," Charles commented.

The colonel's eyes glinted, but his voice was monotone. "Mrs. Hurst is possessed of such good taste, I am certain any basket she arranged for a flea-bitten mongrel would suit the finest family at Grosvenor Square."

"Thank you, Colonel. Trust a horseman to understand the bond between a lady and her most loyal pet."

Colonel Fitzwilliam raised a finger. "Ah, but Duchess is so much more than a loyal pet. She is royalty."

Knowing she was being spoken about, the snarly snapper poked her head above the table. Caroline hated how her sister insisted on allowing Duchess to sit at the table with them. She even let her lap from the bottom of her teacup and lick the morsels off the plates. So disgusting. Caroline had instructed the scullery maids to wash the dishes twice and rinse them with boiled water.

The colonel turned his gleaming look on her. "Miss Bingley, it seems that while everyone else is praising Miss Elizabeth's bravery, you are less impressed."

Every muscle in Caroline's body tensed, but she had gained mastery over her reactions as befit any lady worthy of being

Pemberley's mistress. Widening her eyes when they would narrow, relaxing her fingers when she would clench them in a fist, and speaking airily when her voice would snap, she replied, "You misunderstand me, Colonel."

Charles interjected, "You called her careless."

She would kill him later.

Smiling sweetly, she kept her gaze trained on the colonel. "Only because it befell to dear Miss Eliza to save that girl when there were no more gentlemen present to spare her. Mr. Darcy could hardly be expected to be two places at once: calming the raging horse and keeping the girl from further harm. She is incredibly bold to do what some men would cower to face — speaking out as she did to an armed soldier merely seeing to his duty. In fact, now that you mention it, many of her habits are a touch masculine. I suppose her frequent, unchaperoned walks prepared her for the task."

Would that she could read Mr. Darcy's expression. Any young lady who flaunted propriety as Miss Elizabeth did, who jumped into confrontation so eagerly, was a danger not only to his sister but to his own reputation.

But he said nothing.

His lack of derision disconcerted her. Well, if Mr. Darcy would not condemn the upstart, then Caroline would do her best to see what there was about the lady which prevented him from doing so. "I should very much like to accompany you when you call at Longbourn. It has been too long since I have enjoyed Miss Eliza's company."

Louisa raised Duchess, caressing her to her bosom as a mother held a baby. "Oh, yes, we must accompany you. Duchess would love to see her friends again." The youngest Bennets had tied ribbons for Duchess' hair and presented them to Louisa after services the day before. Louisa had always been too easily bought. Presently, she frowned and pouted. "You do not think Sir William will mind if I bring her to his little dinner party, do you? You know how anxious she gets when I am away."

Hurst cackled. "You have a week to convince him to include her, if that is what you mean to do, but I cannot imagine he would welcome Duchess to his table as we do."

Caroline closed her eyes to keep from rolling them. She had nearly forgotten about that dreaded dinner party a week hence. Forcing a smile, she asked Charles, "Who else is invited? Is it to be a

large party?"

"I believe Sir William invited two or three other families besides the Bennets."

She felt her nostrils flare, but she checked herself. Tittering to add a lightness to the words she meant with her whole heart and soul, she said, "The Lucases and the Bennets will soon grow tired of us if we are always to be in each other's company."

The colonel met her eyes. "Then it is up to us to ensure they find our company desirable."

That dreadful man.

"Is that not so, Darcy?"

Caroline followed the colonel's gaze to Mr. Darcy, and her stomach lurched. He was smiling.

She would not have believed him capable of enjoying their boorish company, but she could not deny his pleased reaction no matter how badly she wished to dismiss it. Had that vexing vixen crawled under his skin like a tick? Bewitched him with her feminine arts?

Relaxing her hands gripping her skirts under the table, smoothing over the fabric before she ripped it, Caroline decided she must keep Mr. Darcy away from Miss Elizabeth. She must somehow prevent him from attending Sir William's dinner party. She only needed to figure out how....

From the corner of her eye, Caroline saw Duchess snatch a piece of ham from the colonel's plate. Then, she fixed her gaze on Caroline as she chewed, effectively saying *Challenge me if you dare*.

Caroline dared. She was not certain how to do it, but she would rid Mr. Darcy of any favorable inclinations toward Miss Elizabeth and show Louisa's pitiful lapdog who was the mistress of Netherfield Park in one strike.

# Chapter 16

A frantic energy seized Mama the day of the Lucases' dinner party. Mary had emerged from her bedchamber with a swollen blemish on the side of her nose, and Mama had declared the day already a disaster. (For how could a gentleman possibly propose with such a target to distract him?)

Having no fresh strawberries to mash against Mary's face, Mama had angered Cook by raiding the pantry for the next best thing — a crockery of strawberry marmalade, enough for all five of her daughters. They would have radiant complexions that night, or her name was not Fanny Bennet.

Lydia licked most of her beauty enhancement away, running her finger also down Kitty's chin when she claimed that a clump was about to fall to the floor.

After a morning of smacking Lydia's fingers away from their faces, Elizabeth seized upon Kitty's suggestion that they walk into Meryton to call at their aunt Philips.

Washing her face in a rush and grabbing her warmest wrap, Elizabeth pulled her sisters out of Longbourn before their mother could think of more ways to beautify her daughters.

Card tables and officers dotted Aunt Philips' parlor. No wonder Kitty and Lydia had been so eager to call.

Elizabeth exchanged pleasantries over a few games of cards, then, seeing how Jane's gaze wandered toward the window (no doubt, hoping to glimpse Mr. Bingley or his carriage traveling up the road), she suggested they visit the apothecary to retrieve more of Mama's draught for her nerves (not that she would drink any before the dinner party, though Elizabeth prayed she might).

Sir William drove by in his phaeton, with Charlotte seated beside him. He reined in his handsome bays, and Charlotte completed their party with her addition.

"I had not expected to see you in Meryton," she said, frowning and pulling out her handkerchief to dab at Elizabeth's ear. "What is this?"

Elizabeth scrubbed her sleeves over her face. "Did I not get all of



it? Mama slathered our faces with strawberry jam, and I was in such a hurry to get away from Longbourn, I must have missed a spot. What is your excuse for leaving Lucas Lodge? I imagine Lady Lucas is busy with the placings and arrangements."

"Precisely," said Charlotte with an impish grin.

Jane gasped. "You love arranging parties."

"True, but the older I get, the more anxious my mother becomes, and the more I miss not having a home of my own where I might arrange parties how I please."

Elizabeth shook her head. "One would think our mothers expect a proposal after dinner tonight."

Charlotte looped her arm through Jane's. "I would not be surprised if Mr. Bingley declares himself sooner rather than later. He is clearly besotted."

Jane blushed and smiled. "I have noticed how often you mention Colonel Fitzwilliam calling at Lucas Lodge, Charlotte. I do not imagine his aim is merely to call on your father."

It was Charlotte's turn to blush, but the sly thing did not expound on the colonel's calls. She turned to Elizabeth, and said, "And what of Mr. Darcy? You mention his name in conversation more often than anyone else."

"I mention his sister just as much," Elizabeth countered.

Charlotte arched an eyebrow. "They call at Longbourn more often than one would suppose."

"Miss Darcy is not yet out in society. She cannot call on her own."

"Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst could accompany her."

Elizabeth glared at Charlotte. "Would you wish their company on Maria?"

"You make your point, but that still does not explain why Mr. Darcy always accompanies her where there are others who would be willing to take his place."

Jane twisted her lips to the side. "I suspect Mr. Darcy is fond of Mama's plum cake. Ever since he admired it, she makes certain to save a few slices should he call."

Elizabeth grinned. "There you have the truth of it, Charlotte. If you do not believe that Mr. Darcy is merely being a good brother, then you may believe that he calls for the plum cake."

Mama's insistence on reserving several slices for the gentleman had caused several altercations between herself and Lydia, who did

not understand why she could not eat the last of the cake. Mama, however, was adamant, and Lydia had to accustom herself to not getting her way. Elizabeth could not help but think that Mama's resolve in Mr. Darcy's behalf was as good for her as it was for Lydia.

Together, the merry trio crossed the street by the post office in the direction of the apothecary, Mr. Jones' place of business.

The door to the post opened suddenly, bringing the three ladies to a halt. And who would walk out but Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy? Realizing how he must have startled them, he quickly apologized. Swiping his hat off his head and swooping a bow, he said, "I had several letters to frank," by way of explanation, shuffling his feet and jutting his thumb over his shoulder. He looked so awkward and penitent, they could not withhold their forgiveness had they wanted to.

When he continued standing there after they had each given their reassurances, Elizabeth broke the silence. "How convenient to cross paths with the topic of our conversation. We were discussing your admiration for our mother's plum cake."

Charlotte and Jane slipped in front of them, so that Mr. Darcy had no choice but to either leave Elizabeth to join them or offer her his arm and walk behind them.

He offered his arm.

"My aunt's cook made the best plum cake. It was my mother's favorite. The cook died shortly before my mother did, and when it became apparent that my mother would not live long after Georgiana's birth, I tried to find the cake's equal. I was a boy then, and I thought that if I could only find her favorite cake and bring it to her, she might be happy and live."

Elizabeth's heart ached for that boy and his motherless sister. "Cake's miraculous properties are too often overlooked."

He smiled, but his eyes brimmed with a melancholy it pained her to allow.

"It must have been difficult for you and your father to raise Miss Darcy without a mother's influence. I am sorry."

"So many times, especially after my father's death, I needed her guidance. Badly." His tone was brittle.

"You have done better by her than you give yourself credit for. Miss Darcy is a fine young lady of whom I am certain your mother would be proud."

"She would be. *I* certainly am."

Elizabeth allowed her smile to grow. "Good. That is all she needs, you know. Your approval. It is plain to see how she dotes on you."

"I am all she has."

Elizabeth scrunched her face. She had meant to praise, not draw attention to how alone they were in the world. There were times she wished her life was not quite as populated as it was. She gasped as the contrast in their circumstances struck her. "How wicked I am to ever wish myself without the embarrassments my family often causes me when you and your sister have only each other. The fact of the matter is that I love my mother, father, and sisters dearly — for all their faults, and of which I have more than my fair share."

He turned to her, and she held her breath, willing her outburst unsaid. "What do you consider your greatest fault?" he asked.

"Aside from my obvious wickedness in wishing my family improved?"

He smiled, but it soon faded, and he said nothing.

Surely, he did not expect a serious reply? She examined his face and saw his customary look — eyebrows pushed together and broody frown. He was serious.

"I will only tell you my greatest fault if you tell me yours," she said.

He bowed, his voice low and somber. "I do not easily forgive. My friendship, once lost, is lost forever."

So taken aback was she at his swift, open admission, she hardly knew what to say. "Are you resentful, Mr. Darcy?"

"I am."

"That is harsh. I will have to be cautious, I see."

Another smile. This one spread beyond his lips.

Having nothing to lose of which Mr. Darcy was not already painfully aware, and a friend to gain, Elizabeth sighed her resignation. "My circumstances, as you must be aware, are not in my favor. I have no fortune or connections, and while I adore my family, their behavior often draws censure."

"Those are circumstances beyond your ability to control. I will not let you off the hook so easily, Miss Elizabeth, now that I have disclosed my fault to you."

She laughed. "And I had hoped to distract you."

"I am not easily distracted."

"I see that." She fell into a ponderous silence, listing out her

faults in her mind and weighing them to determine which was serious enough without changing Mr. Darcy's view of her.

"Is it so difficult to name your fault?" he asked.

"Hardly! My trouble, Mr. Darcy, is in selecting only one to tell you. I am often impertinent."

He nodded in agreement.

"While I never mean to embarrass anyone, I cannot observe a folly but laugh at it."

Another nod. "I am well aware of that."

"I prize my freedom at the expense of propriety."

He rubbed his fingers against his chin. "You refer to your unchaperoned walks?" She nodded, and he continued, "Society's strictures claim to protect women, but I am of the mind that uncontrolled men — be they of gentle birth or not — are more dangerous to a lady than an invigorating walk out of doors."

A man who understood the limitations imposed on the fairer sex? While he did not precisely express support of her daily walks, he did not disapprove of them. He did not disapprove of her. Whether it was a need to be certain or the momentum of the moment or the ease she felt with him, Elizabeth did not know, but she could see Charlotte's shoulders tense when she added another fault to her already impressive list. "And perhaps I am a little too proud of my ability to judge a new acquaintance's character."

"A grave fault when you are wrong."

"I never am."

His intense eyes bored into her. "Are you prone to prejudice, Miss Elizabeth?"

Oh, why had she not kept her mouth shut? "Appalling, I know. However, allow me to reassure you that if I am ever proven wrong, I will be the first to admit to my mistake and laugh at my own folly."

"I can find no fault in that." The glow in his eyes warmed her through and nearly made her trip over her own feet.

Making light of her reaction, she teased, "How good of you, sir. Had you said otherwise, I would have had another fault to admit to, and my vanity has suffered quite enough for today."

He let go of her arm and stepped away. Only then did she notice where they stood. Jane and Charlotte waited for her by the door of Mr. Jones' establishment. They had walked across the village.

Mr. Darcy bowed and bid his farewells.

"See you this evening," Elizabeth said, rubbing her hands over her arms to prove that her breathy voice had everything to do with the cold and absolutely nothing at all to do with Mr. Darcy.

Charlotte shook her head, and Elizabeth imagined her clucking her tongue. "Do you want him to think you too far beneath his station? A man of the first circles — who can no doubt trace his lineage all the way back to William the Conqueror — must consider his position. And you took pains to point out how unsuitable you are as a potential match when I have never met another man so well suited to you as Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth's cheeks flooded with heat. "He is not looking to marry. I spoke to him as I would with a friend. As I would with you."

"I do not provoke that becoming blush in your cheeks or the light sparkling in your eyes."

Jane took Elizabeth's hand. "Charlotte is right, Lizzy. You could do far worse than fall in love with a man whom you consider a friend. Someone you can talk to without reserve and who knows you like none other."

Elizabeth pulled her hand free and wrapped her arms around herself. "I am not falling in love with Mr. Darcy. He is handsome to look at, I will own. However, I daresay I am not alone in my opinion of his good looks. It is true that I look forward to conversing with him. But that is the extent of his danger to me. I am too well aware of how truly unsuitable we are for each other to pretend otherwise."

Neither of her companions looked convinced. And if she were being honest with herself, Elizabeth was not convinced either. When it came down to it, were they not equals — both born into the same class, though he occupied the upper echelons while her position was humbler? Surely, his family had some flaws — although not so many as hers. Even the Darcys had to have some imperfections, scandals, and deficiencies from which their elevated status excused them. That was the way of it. How often had Elizabeth laughed over the atrocities and scandals of the aristocracy, knowing that their titles and fortunes kept them from fully experiencing the consequences of their poor behavior.

Was not love all sunshine and roses? A blind faith in the others' perfection? If contemplating Mr. Darcy's flaws proved she was not in love with him, then that was what Elizabeth would do. She

would spend the rest of the day pondering the negative qualities Mr. Darcy might possess, aside from his admitted resentment — the frailties of character society was all too happy to excuse and overlook.



\* \* \*

Darcy had not intended to speak of his mother. He never spoke of her to anyone outside of his own family. She was a part of his life he kept to himself, too precious to share. He certainly had not meant to dwell on how alone Georgiana was — how alone *he* was. But he could not take the words back once they were said, and he was grateful that Miss Elizabeth did not press his confidence. Instead, she had shared in his discomfort by exposing her own ... how had she put it? ... wickedness in wishing her family improved. Yes, that was it. She often teased when she was uncomfortable, Darcy noticed. He sensed that she valued his good opinion, and he felt the honor.

He knew better than to ask such a pointed question as he had. Darcy could name only a handful of people who would honestly admit to any fault, and yet, Miss Elizabeth had listed several of hers. She had not dragged anyone else down to make herself look better, nor had she feigned false modesty by claiming certain virtues as faults.

Furthermore, when he had revealed his resentment to her, she did not chastise him nor attempt to convince him to change when others had tried. Instead, she had taken responsibility for herself, saying she would be cautious with her actions. Darcy appreciated how willing she was to adapt to his standard, and he graciously returned the favor by extending greater clemency to her circumstances.

She was overly confident in her ability to judge character but

humble enough to admit a mistake. Darcy was glad she had sketched him accurately. He wondered what she would think of his aunt Catherine, or his cousin Anne? Would she see them like caricatures, as he often did?

Of course, all of his inquiries were for Georgiana's benefit. If he was to allow Miss Elizabeth into their tight circle, he had to ensure her worthiness. He had meant what he said: he was not easily distracted, and his sister's protection was his primary concern.

He stopped walking, looking around and realizing with no small amount of amazement that he had walked past the stables and now stood beside Clarice's pen.

Darcy was not easily distracted, he amended, unless Miss Elizabeth was the source of his distraction.

# Chapter 17

Georgiana curled her fingers around Darcy's arm. "I am excited for this evening. Will it not be wonderful to see the Lucases and the Bennets? I think they invited Colonel Forster from the regiment, as well." Her eyelashes fluttered down. "I — I inquired if any other officers were included — just in case — but Miss Lucas assured me that only Colonel Forster, the officer in command, was on their guest list."

Darcy would make certain to inquire whether George Wickham was assigned to his regiment or not. The colonel had proved himself a reasonable man. He had granted Darcy an audience immediately and attended to his complaints responsibly. He had called the officer in to question him directly and, upon ascertaining the facts of the case, had been quick to reprimand his messenger and make reparations with those affected. He was not the sort of officer in command with whom Wickham would wish to mix. Darcy paused at the bottom of the stairs and patted his sister's hand. "I will take care of it."

Her eyes flew open. "Oh, I know you will. You always do. But — it is just that — it was easier for me to be brave when I thought it unlikely for him to be here. Not that I believe it any more likely that he would be assigned here now than I did before, but it is the possibility that frightens me. One moment, I am determined to be brave and stand my ground. Why should I cut our stay short when we are having such a wonderful time? Then, the next moment, I am filled with doubts. What if I burst into tears when I see him? What if he holds my mistake over you—"

Darcy tried to interrupt her, but she held up her hand. "I know very well that you were the one to purchase his commission, William. I hate how he has used me to extract what he wishes from you. I would end it if I could, but as long as he holds my secret — one which would ruin me while he would receive as many pats on the back as he would slaps on the wrist — you will always have to protect me from him."

Darcy frowned. He had told Wickham never to come to him for



money, that it would be at the risk of his own life if he attempted to approach them again. But it was only a matter of time before Wickham's circumstances grew so desperate, he would take the risk knowing that Darcy would do anything to protect his sister's reputation.

Duchess pranced past them, looking over her shoulder as though to ask *Are you coming or what?*

Georgiana guffawed shakily. "It is almost as if she knew I needed to laugh. What a good little girl you are!" She leaned down, and Duchess twirled and barked, delighted to play a game. Pouncing forward, she licked Georgiana's extended fingers, ran away, and spun around to see if her friend would follow her.

The strain left Georgiana's laugh, and it was with lighter hearts they entered the salon together where Miss Bingley had arranged for them to take an afternoon tea.

Richard sat beside Mr. Hurst, sharing a newspaper. Miss Bingley sat beside her sister, fiddling with the butter knife. Her pinched lips turned to a smile the moment Darcy and Georgiana appeared.

Duchess ran across the room to Mrs. Hurst. "There you are, you naughty thing! I had thought you lost and was about to send out a search party." Reaching down, she lifted Duchess onto her lap so that the pooch could see over the table with all the dignified excitement of a child allowed to sit at a table where sweetmeats and pastries lay temptingly on plates. She licked her chops and turned her dark puppy eyes on her mistress with a low whine.

Mrs. Hurst glanced over at her sister, then when Miss Bingley was distracted with the tea service, she plucked a piece of roast beef off the platter of cold meats and fed it to a happy Duchess.

"I wish you would not allow your dog at my table, Louisa. It is not to be borne!" Miss Bingley said sharply.

Mr. Hurst and Richard hid behind shaking newspapers.

Darcy bit his lips together and looked down at his feet penitently. Miss Bingley must have followed his line of vision, thus betraying Mrs. Hurst's sneaking of the treat.

The lady, however, paid her younger sister no heed. "I thank you not to speak to me so sharply, Caroline. Do not forget who is the eldest between us and how your lack of respect for your elders reflects on you, dear. Charles understands that Duchess is like a child to me, and he does not mind."

"You cannot use him to justify your behavior when he is not

even here."

"Sorry I am late." Bingley entered the room, wiping his hands against his breeches, then his face with a handkerchief.

Without wasting another breath, Mrs. Hurst replied, "See? He is here, now. You do not mind if I allow Duchess to sit with me at the table, do you? She is such a well-behaved lady..." She cooed and coddled her pet.

"You ask a man who did not take care to wash properly before taking his tea with us?" Miss Bingley glared at her brother. "Seriously, Charles, where have you been and what were you doing to arrive in this state?"

He looked down, dropping the handkerchief from his face to better inspect his waistcoat and breeches. "Did I miss a spot? I am sorry, Caro, but the gentlemen will understand my upset when I tell them that my favorite hunter is off his feed. The groom gave him a bucket of oats, and he will not touch it."

Richard immediately rose to his feet, with nary another look at the spread before him. "What does the groom say?"

Mr. Hurst joined their group, and Georgiana left Darcy's side to join the ladies.

After hearing Bingley's account, Darcy suggested they send for the farrier. "I appreciated how tenderly Mr. Herriot treated the little girl and her puppy. I hear he is exceptional with horses." He left out any mention of his famed ointment. Bingley would find out about it soon enough.

Miss Bingley stood, leaning forward tensely against the table. "First, you must drink some tea. It is frightfully chilly out of doors, and I would not wish you to fall ill as well. Not when a hot cup of tea will warm you." She pushed the cups she had poured to the gentlemen, handing Darcy his personally. "I put a little extra sugar in yours," she said, her fingers brushing over his.

Richard raised his cup in the air. "He needs an extra dose of sweetness."

Bingley tried not to smile.

Darcy rolled his eyes at the both of them and set the cup on the table. He did not like his tea too sweet, nor did he wish to encourage Miss Bingley's presumption when she had not given her other guests more sugar or cream.

The gentlemen sat, their chairs pushed away from the table, ready to retreat to the stables as soon as they had drunk their tea.

Bingley settled beside Miss Bingley, causing a great deal of upheaval when the leg of his chair pulled against the bottom of her skirt.

Georgiana, good sister that she was, took advantage of the distraction and promptly switched her cup with Darcy's with a wink.

With a sip to check the temperature, Darcy tossed back the contents before Miss Bingley saw what they had done.

Mr. Hurst, Richard, and Bingley made quick work of their tea, and before Miss Bingley could ring for another pot, they pushed away from their empty plates.

Miss Bingley took great pleasure performing her tasks as the hostess. Her manner softened considerably. Reaching toward Duchess, who recoiled with a low growl, she suggested, "How about I take her for a little walk near the stables?"

Duchess snapped at her fingers.

Miss Bingley snatched her hand away, the hardness in her glare defying the sweetness in her voice. "She must be out of sorts. Pray, allow me to take her for a walk, Louisa."

Mrs. Hurst plucked a piece of ham from the platter and fed it to Duchess.

"She must be parched," Georgiana said, stroking Duchess and offering her untouched tea to the puppy.

Mrs. Hurst took the cup happily, holding it for her dog while Miss Bingley's face darkened a deeper shade of red with each lap of Duchess' tongue.

Darcy had to leave before he burst. Richard, Bingley, and Hurst must have been of the same mind. They fairly tumbled out of the parlor, walking as fast as they could down the hall and out of the door until they were out of Miss Bingley's hearing and could properly laugh.

"Miss Darcy has earned a friend for life with Louisa," Mr. Hurst chortled.

Bingley shook his head and chuckled. "I did not think she had it in her to defy Caroline so blatantly. Well done, I say!"

"Wishing you had done the same?" Richard teased.

"Of course! I told Caroline that this is a relaxed party of close friends, and we need not stand on such formalities. What do I care if Duchess partakes of my food at the table or from a plate on the floor? So long as Louisa holds her as she does, I see no harm

indulging them."

"Especially when it irritates Miss Bingley as much as it does," Darcy said.

Bingley grinned. "That might have something to do with it." His manners sobered at reaching the stables. However, the groom assured him he had sent a stable boy for Mr. Herriot besides the precautions he himself had taken changing out the hay and checking for mold. He suspected an abscess, but he could not get the gelding to soften his mouth enough to get a good look.

They stayed in the stables, talking about horses and hunting and the evening's entertainments until the farrier arrived and confirmed that the groom's suspicion was correct. The hunter had an abscess.

It took all of them, but the farrier lanced the pustule and applied the same ointment Mr. Herriot had sold to him the day before to treat little Jenny's bruised wrist. The same salve the Bennets used. Darcy made a mental note to purchase some to bring to Pemberley, for surely his household would benefit from the versatile treatment. If nothing else, he would smile every time he saw the bottle at the memory of Miss Elizabeth's flustered smile.

Darcy checked his pocket watch. "We had better return to the house if we are to make ourselves presentable for dinner."

Leaving the hunter under the groom and farrier's care, Bingley led the way out of the stables. "I am relieved Mr. Herriot proved himself as capable as you said, Darcy. Nothing would induce me to miss this dinner, but I would have worried when I would much rather enjoy Miss Bennet's company without the distraction of a sick horse."

"One look at her blue eyes, and you would have put the horse completely out of your mind," Richard teased.

Bingley's laugh was cut short. Running toward them was Mrs. Hurst's maid, tears streaming down her face. "She is dead! She is dead!"

# Chapter 18

Darcy's heart stilled. "Who is dead?"

"Her Grace! Mrs. Hurst is beside herself with grief."

"Oh, dear Lord," Mr. Hurst exclaimed, running to the house ahead of them.

Bingley returned inside the barn, calling out behind him, "I will see if Mr. Herriot can have a look. Perhaps something might be done yet."

"Miss Darcy suggested the same. That is why I came out here." The maid wiped at her face and sniffed.

Darcy walked back to the house with her, Bingley and Mr. Herriot following on their heels.

Mrs. Hurst's wails could be heard through the sandstone walls to the courtyard. She clutched her precious puppy to her chest while Miss Bingley tried to reassure her. "She is perfectly well. Dead dogs do not snore, Louisa. You are causing a scene."

"What do I care when my beloved baby does not wake?" The maid rushed to Mrs. Hurst's side, pulling a bottle of smelling salts out of her apron and waving it in front of her mistress.

Darcy's relief was immense when Duchess sneezed. He had grown attached to the little nuisance. But something was wrong with her. She sneezed and snorted, but she did not open her eyes. And her body fell limply against Mrs. Hurst's arms.

He stepped aside to allow the farrier to pass. Would that Mr. Herriot's ointment could restore the likable tail-wagger.

Darcy hung at the fringes of the room, Georgiana's hand in his, listening for Mr. Herriot's diagnosis. He spoke softly with Mrs. Hurst, asking questions while he gently took Duchess from her arms and stretched his patient on the carpet at his feet. He poked and prodded, listened and watched, all the while keeping Mrs. Hurst engaged in conversation.

Mr. Hurst clutched his wife's hands in his own, sitting close and offering his shoulder. Darcy had never seen the gentleman show the least affection for his wife, and the image of support he portrayed cast him in a more favorable light in Darcy's mind.

Miss Bingley stood stiffly at her sister's other side. She offered no support.

Finally, Mr. Herriot stood. "I do not know what the dog imbibed, but it is plain to me she got into something she should not have."

Miss Bingley's accusation snapped. "This is a consequence of allowing her to partake of food at the table."

Mr. Herriot's eyebrows raised, and he scratched his chin. "Dogs are not as picky as us humans. They will eat anything if it smells good to them. If I am right about her, then she ought to be much improved by morning. But someone ought to keep an eye on her during the night to make sure she drinks water the moment she awakes and take her for a walk. She should be normal on the morrow."

"See? Your abigail can stay with her while we are at dinner. Now," Miss Bingley clapped her hands together, "we had better ready ourselves."

"Oh, I could not possibly leave my sweet muffin, my precious snowflake. She needs me! What if she woke up only to find me gone? I cannot abandon her!" Mrs. Hurst covered her face with her hands and leaned into her husband's shoulder.

"Very well. Then, I will leave her to your care," Miss Bingley made to leave the room, so she did not see the horrified expression on her sister's face.

"You cannot leave me alone in my distress! Caroline, do not leave me, I beg you!"

Far from being flattered, Miss Bingley's arched shoulders reminded Darcy of a cat backed into a corner. Claspings her hands together and turning to Mrs. Hurst, she said, "Do not be silly, Louisa. You have Mr. Hurst."

"He is useless!" she exclaimed, straightening away from the shoulder she had been crying upon for the past quarter of an hour at least.

Mr. Hurst sighed. "All the same, I will remain behind should you or Duchess require any assistance."

"See? He is perfectly capable of taking care of you both," Miss Bingley said with an unsympathetic smirk.

Mrs. Hurst's jaw dropped. "You cannot mean to abandon me like this? When I need you!"

Georgiana stepped forward. "Please, Mrs. Hurst, I know I am a poor substitute, but it would be my honor to stay with you and

Duchess. There is no worse feeling than the helplessness one experiences when a loved one is ailing. May I share your burden?"

Mrs. Hurst looked again at Miss Bingley, who was now as white as she had before been red. Darcy would never claim the ability to read her mind, but it was impossible not to see how she resented Georgiana for shaming her into behaving as a loving sister would.

Darcy wanted to pull Georgiana into his arms and embrace the brave girl for her clever intervention. She would miss out on an evening she had been anticipating merely to provide small comfort to Mrs. Hurst. Her selflessness guaranteed Miss Bingley's change of heart, for she would never allow herself to look inferior.

Recovering her composure, Miss Bingley blinked several times, as though her sister's supplication had moved her to tears. Clasp ing her hand over her heart, she said, "Me, abandon you when you are so clearly distraught? I could never treat you so poorly, Louisa, and it pains me to hear you imply that you believe me capable of such treachery."

Now it was Mrs. Hurst who had to provide comfort for her maligned sister.

Darcy turned in disgust, pulling Georgiana with him out of the room. He would not allow Miss Bingley to ruin his sister's evening. And he could not help but think that they would all enjoy Sir William's dinner party more for Miss Bingley's absence.

# Chapter 19

Given the choice between arriving early to ensure a lady misses no opportunity to impress the gentleman her mama has decided she must marry or arriving late to make a grand entrance, Mama always chose the first.

Elizabeth settled beside Jane and Charlotte on the settee, resigned to several minutes of uninterrupted conversation with her friend while her mother and Lady Lucas jousted over whose daughter would be the victor and announce her engagement before the others.

Charlotte watched the competing matrons steadily. "They will have nothing to talk about once we are all married."

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. She had noticed how often and how warmly Charlotte spoke of Colonel Fitzwilliam, as well as his frequent calls at Lucas Lodge. She had also noticed how regular her dear friend had become in taking her daily constitutional. "How good it is to hear you speak thus. I believe you shall both make each other very happy."

"Not as happy as the colonel's relation to the aristocracy makes my papa. He might as well be next in line to rule than the second son of the Earl of Matlock."

"Has he proposed already?" asked Jane.

"No. However, I left him in no doubt of my reply should he ask," Charlotte said with an impish smile.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "How romantic of you. Nobody could ever accuse you of being a flirt."

"Precisely. Do not underestimate the power of forthrightness."

The butler entered the drawing room, and Elizabeth sat taller in her seat as he announced the arrivals, Colonel and Mrs. Forster. "Wrong colonel," she mumbled, slumping a smidgen.

She imagined that if Miss Bingley had anything to do with the timing of their arrival, she would ensure that they arrived late. She seemed like the sort who would enjoy displaying her finery to advantage with a grand entrance, confident in her superiority and ability to secure the admiration of everyone in the room.



So convinced was Elizabeth that the Netherfield Park party would arrive late, she was unprepared for the butler to announce them.

She felt eyes on her and looked up to meet Mr. Darcy's gaze. Her heart tripped in her chest, and Elizabeth felt the dissembling of the lies she had believed about herself until that moment. She was not indifferent. True, she considered Mr. Darcy a friend, but she could not pinpoint the moment when he had become so much more.

He was happy to see her, too. His smile and the softness in his eyes told her so.

Jane nudged her. "Miss Bingley is not here."

"Glory be," Charlotte whispered.

Elizabeth had not noticed. She had only seen Mr. Darcy — the friend with whom she was fast falling in love.



\* \* \*

It was easy for Darcy to return Miss Elizabeth's smile when her face lit so brightly and her eyes met his with such firm pleasure.

Richard's shoulder pressed against Darcy's arm. "What do you think of her appalling family, disadvantageous circumstances, lack of fortune and connections now, Darcy?" he whispered. "Dare we expose our Georgie to their company?"

Instant ire flared up in Darcy's chest, but he bit back his retort. The words had not sounded so ugly proceeding from his own mouth as they did, even in jest, from his cousin. They sounded like something Miss Bingley would say. Haughty and self-righteous.

Sir William greeted them, along with the Forsters.

In a low tone, Darcy reminded Richard, "Remember what our objective is. We will not be easy until we know if Wickham is to be stationed here."

Richard nodded, and they conversed with the Forsters until

dinner was called.

The youngest Bennets hung around the Forsters, eager for talk of the soldiers. Georgiana looked ruffled at first, but she recovered her composure with a skill which would have made their mother proud. Still, Darcy was pleased to see that Georgiana was to be seated between himself and Miss Maria Lucas.

Lady Lucas had made sure to mention several times that their dinner was to be an informal affair, as befit a gathering wherein young ladies not yet out in society could participate. "Really, it is a pity they should be denied some diversion," she said.

As informal as Lady Lucas claimed the occasion, her true plan became obvious when she arranged her guests around the table. Bingley was placed next to Miss Bennet. Richard was settled between Miss Lucas and Miss Mary. That left Darcy beside Miss Elizabeth.

Lady Lucas looked as pleased at the arrangement as her matchmaking rival, Mrs. Bennet.

Darcy breathed a sigh of relief when Miss Elizabeth engaged Colonel Forster, who sat on her other side, in conversation.

He was still rattled over Richard's taunt. It bothered him that his view, which he prided himself on being constant, had seemed to alter. Darcy needed to understand why and how he saw her differently. Admittedly, the smell of her rosewater made it difficult.

Shaking his head, he focused. He always acted as a gentleman ought to. But could he think of himself as a gentleman when his views had been so harsh and condemning? What of his conduct? Had his desire to show Richard wrong led him to inadvertently resort to disguise? Did that not make him dishonest? And had Richard not challenged him, would his behavior have been any better? He would not have danced with anyone beyond his own party.

Mrs. Bennet interrupted his thoughts, swirling her glass of wine as she asked too loudly, "Is it true, Mr. Darcy, that you own half of Derbyshire?"

It was an indelicate question, unworthy of a reply, to which Darcy merely nodded in the vain hope she would take his hint and speak no further of matters which did not concern anyone but himself.

He sensed Miss Elizabeth stiffen.

Miss Mary's sharp voice cut through the embarrassment. "The

Lord said, and I quote from the gospel of Luke, 'And he said unto them, Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.'"

Miss Lydia huffed. "Money cannot buy life, but I daresay it helps you enjoy the life you have a good deal more." She and Miss Kitty giggled despite the pious glares Miss Mary sent down the table.

Mr. Bennet, doing his best to ignore them, raised his wineglass. "My compliments on the wine selection, Lady Lucas. This burgundy is exceptional."

Miss Elizabeth did not touch her soup spoon or glass. She sat with her hands folded in front of her and her lips pressed together firmly in a line, a picture of restraint and shame.

Miss Elizabeth was everything charming and captivating, but her family, circumstances, and position in society made her entirely unsuitable. Supremely unsuitable.

And yet, he could not find it in him to care how others saw her when, in his eyes, she was exceptional. A dangerous thought for a Darcy.

For the first time in his life, he resented the strictures his position placed upon him. He envied Richard and Bingley their freedom to choose, for Darcy knew that if he could throw caution to the wind, he would choose to know Miss Elizabeth better. There was nobody else he wanted to spend more time with than her.

Just sitting beside her, looking at her like the fool he was, thrilled his heart and his mind. What would she say? What would make her laugh? He wanted to know

He could easily justify his interest. Were they really so different after all? She was a gentleman's daughter; he was a gentleman's son. Her behavior was above reproach in his eyes; he could not fault her walks when he often rode without a groom. She was honest about her faults; he prided himself in his honesty. Until recently. She was exceptional, whereas he had given a false impression.

His spoon grew heavy in his hand. Darcy could no longer claim the perfection of manners he had assumed he possessed, and the realization left him feeling exposed. The new light shed on his character was not as flattering as he was accustomed to, and he saw himself as others must have seen him all along. The same qualities he had taken great pride in — one of them being, ironically, pride itself — were now flaws.

Miss Mary did not have to cite another scripture for him to know that pride was before a fall. And Darcy had fallen — fallen at the feet of the most delightful creature more honest than he, with no connections to soothe over her faults nor fortune to excuse the indiscretions of her family. A lady who, he realized in horror, would have mocked his airs had they met under more favorable circumstances.

Darcy clenched his jaw. He hated it when Richard was right.

Miss Elizabeth turned to him with her smiles and wit, twisting daggers into his gut with her openness and genuineness. He tried to do more than nod and give curt answers. He tried to pull himself out of the gloom shrouding him. He tried because she deserved it from him, and a larger piece of him than he had supposed capable of craved her good opinion, her continued friendship, her heart. He tried because if he did not, then he was no better than anyone else he had ever held in contempt for their want of character. Miss Bingley. Wickham. And, yes, even the Bennets.

She was, however, observant. Miss Elizabeth knew him. Several times, she looked up at him, and every time, he asked if she wished for another spoonful of whatever dish was nearest at hand to spare her the question. To spare himself the reply before he understood himself.

Fortunately, the dinner concluded, and the ladies followed Lady Lucas into the drawing room.

The gentlemen drank and smoked while Darcy swirled the amber liquid in his cup. He emerged from his numb haze enough to overhear Richard inquire how Colonel Forster found Meryton.

"There is a man of my acquaintance who recently purchased a commission. I wonder if he might be assigned to you, Colonel?" he asked.

"What is his name? Perhaps I know him."

"Wickham. George Wickham."

Colonel Forster took a long drag of his cigar, as though filling his head with smoke might conjure a face to put with the name. Exhaling the vile fumes, he said, "I cannot say I have had the honor of ever meeting anyone of that name."

Darcy's shoulders sagged in relief.

"However," the colonel added, "I am expecting more arrivals from London over the next few weeks."

Darcy tensed. So much for that.

Again, Darcy attempted to shake his mood. He complimented Sir William's brandy and smiled affably when the gentleman launched into the tale of how he had secured a barrel of the Cognac region's finest in the midst of Napoleon's war.

Upon completion of his story, Sir William declared it was time to join the ladies, and a fresh bout of panic surged through Darcy's veins. He was not ready to face her yet.

He followed the gentlemen into the drawing room, wishing the evening over and wishing it would never end.

Georgiana conversed with Miss Bennet and Miss Maria. He did not want to interrupt them.

Richard stayed with Sir William, who joined his eldest daughter.

Bingley abandoned Darcy to stand behind Miss Bennet's chair. She welcomed his company along with Georgiana and Miss Maria. Drat. Perhaps Darcy ought to have joined them after all. Now he could not without crowding them.

Having nowhere else to go, he took his place by the fire, staring into the flames. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Miss Elizabeth approach. He knew he ought to leave. He was not up to her conversation or her observations. But though his heart raced away, his feet refused to budge. He looked up at her helplessly and wiped his palms against his breeches, at once hot and cold, anxious and blissful, flying and falling.

Falling.

He was falling.

In a flash, he understood his reaction, and the reality of his predicament terrified him. Of all the ladies in the kingdom who would have looked up to him as the epitome of gentlemanly gentlemen, he had fallen in love with the one lady who was completely unimpressed with everything he had ever held in high esteem.

Her fine eyes searched his face, more concerned than curious. "You have been exceptionally quiet tonight, Mr. Darcy. Are you well?"

Well and gone. Well and distraught. Well and lost.

Her appearance at his side cheered his heart, despite his depressing turn of thought. How easy it was to assume that the teasing retort he had adopted since the moment they had met was his true nature. That he was not haughty, condescending, and brooding. "Must one's contemplative silence signify an illness?" he

asked, glancing across the room at Sir William, who was a vision of good health and animated narrative.

Miss Elizabeth followed his line of sight, her smile spreading over her lips but stopping short of her eyes as she turned to face him once again. "I see your point, but I get the impression that your contemplations do not give you any pleasure. If that is the case, then pray allow me to interrupt them and give you something more diverting to ponder." Her eyes danced around the room, seeking a target for her mirth.

Darcy watched her, his heart alternately lifting in hope and crashing in despair.

## Chapter 20

Darcy no longer felt himself safe in Miss Elizabeth's company. He lived in dread the following day with the likelihood that the Bennets would either call at Netherfield Park or he would be expected to accompany Georgiana to Longbourn should she wish to call. He could not see Miss Elizabeth. Not until he was confident in his ability to hide the emotions she stirred within him.

While his attempts to maintain his distance proved triumphant, he had not counted on Miss Elizabeth's constant presence in his thoughts.

By the end of the day following Sir William's dinner party, Darcy knew he must take drastic action. It was time to return to London.

Leaving was an easy conclusion when he considered the matter at further length. Richard seemed more himself, and Bingley was proving himself perfectly capable of managing his estate without any interference from Darcy. He had accomplished his purpose as much as he could regarding them.

The arrival of more soldiers from London added more incentive to Darcy's desire to depart. Georgiana's heartbreak was too recent and too thorough to risk exposing her to Wickham.

Yes, it was time to retire to London. A week there, then they could journey to Pemberley before travel became more cumbersome. Muddy roads were one thing, but snow and ice were quite another. If they departed soon, they might arrive before the first snowfall.

The more Darcy considered the advantages of leaving over the risks of staying, the more convinced he became of the wisdom of this course.

Following the audible trail, he found Georgiana in the music room, playing the newest sheets he had given to her. He settled into a chair to listen, but she sensed his presence and stopped playing before he had crossed one foot over the other.

Swiveling around on the bench to face him, her hands grasping either side of her seat as though she might spring off of the cushion if she did not hold herself down, she asked, "Do you think we might

call at Longbourn today?"

Darcy stifled a groan. Not a promising beginning.

She continued before he could reply. "I found the perfect piece for Miss Elizabeth. She insists she does not play well, and I cannot believe it. It would be like her to minimize her own talent when she is so capable." Having said all of that in one breath, Georgiana now inhaled deeply and exhaled contentedly. "I am so happy we came, William. Thank you for agreeing to stay."

Darcy gawked open-mouthed at his sister, unable to say what he had intended to suggest.

"In fact," she continued, picking at her thumb and looking at him hopefully, "I had hoped to discuss the possibility of inviting the Bennets and the Misses Lucas to Darcy House. We could go to the bookshops and the theater. And to Gunter's." She clapped her hands together. "Or Asterley's Amphitheater! Oh, they would love that!"

His shock must have shown on his face, for she quickly amended, "That is, if you approve. Miss Lucas thinks that if I invite the three eldest Bennet sisters, then the youngest will realize what their brash conduct excludes them from, and would sooner act with more propriety than risk missing out on another invitation to town." She tilted her chin to the side. "I think I ought to try, do you not, William? They do not listen to their sisters' admonition, but they have little motivation to change. If they do not improve, they would have nobody but themselves to blame, and I would not feel bad excluding them because I will have made my conditions clear."

Wavering between pride at her determination to fix terms and uphold them and horror at the idea of Miss Lydia prancing about Darcy House, Darcy did not trust himself to respond. This was becoming a problem for him. First, Miss Elizabeth. Now, his own sister.

"What of the soldiers?" he asked stupidly.

The expectant gleam in her blue eyes did not dim. "What of them? I thought you might suggest returning to London, but I cannot allow you to spoil everyone's enjoyment merely to spare me from discomfort."

"You heard Colonel Forster. Wickham might be assigned to Meryton."

She nodded. "I know it. But I cannot live in fear of crossing paths with him for the rest of my life. My time here has given me more confidence. I almost feel that I could face him if it came down



to it."

"You do not have to risk it, you know."

"I do, and I am grateful to you and Richard for always protecting me. It is an extra comfort to have more supportive friends who would never stand for anyone to cross the people they are fond of." Her lip curled mischievously. "I would love to see what quick work Miss Lucas or Miss Elizabeth would make of Wickham. If he is foolish enough to say anything at all against me, even Miss Bennet would rally to my defense ... though she would also be the one to attempt to assign him a proper motive."

"You have not confided the events of last summer to them, have you?" he asked, holding down his panic.

"I would not think of doing so without your approval."

Darcy sighed his relief. It was clear to him that the hold of friendship was too strong to expect a rational reaction from Georgiana. She would never agree to leaving unless he and Richard decided it was best for her.

Thus, he dismissed himself after begrudgingly agreeing to accompany her to Longbourn later that day. He needed to find Richard.

Richard found him in the corridor. "Darcy! Just the man I sought." He turned so they walked in the same direction, his hand squeezing Darcy's shoulder. Dropping his voice, he said, "I want to thank you for accepting Bingley's invitation on my behalf. I would not have come otherwise."

Darcy was flummoxed. Had the entire household conspired against him to foil his plan? "Have you spoken to Georgie?"

"Why? Has she expressed a desire to leave?" Richard dropped his hand to hover at his hip, where the hilt of his sword usually rested.

"Calm yourself. She is glad to extend her circle of friends with the Bennets and Lucases."

Richard's puffed chest deflated. "Good. They are good influences on her, and I would hate to deny her their company merely to avoid that rascal Wickham. It does not do to wallow in one's misery or dwell on what might have been." He stopped, his eyes glazing over. His thoughts must have been pleasant, for Darcy had never seen him look so tender. With a blink, he turned to face Darcy. "Really, Darcy, if we had not come here, I would still be hiding out in the library and causing my mother no end of grief."

What else could Darcy do but nod until Richard left him to write

a long overdue letter to his mother?

The stairs to Darcy's right and his bedchamber farther down the length of the hall provided a sort of crossroads. His valet would have a change of clothes ready for him to wear to Longbourn, but Darcy was not yet ready to admit defeat. He took the stairs and continued out of doors to the stables where Bingley spent most of his spare time — that is, the time he was not calling at Longbourn.

"How does he fare?" Darcy asked, leaning against the stall beside his friend.

"Much improved, thank goodness," Bingley answered. "He ate his oats today." He picked a piece of hay from the floor, draping his arms over the partition and twirling the straw between his fingers. "I want to thank you for lending me confidence, Darcy. I could not have let this estate without knowing I could trust in you to offer your guidance."

Darcy had had his fill of gratitude. "You would have done just as well without me."

"Maybe. Maybe not. All the same, I am glad you are here. It seems to have benefited all of us. Richard's spirits are greatly improved, and Miss Darcy seems more ... relaxed ... and ... happier ... than I remember her." He flung the straw to the ground and turned to face Darcy. "Are you happy here, Darcy? Is there anything I can do to improve your stay?"

Darcy could not tell him that he would rather leave. How could he when Bingley, Richard, and Georgiana were so content?

Pushing himself off of the stall, Darcy said, "You have done plenty." His voice sounding harsher than he had intended, he softened his tone and added, "I am relieved your hunter is improved. With that happy thought, I must see to some letters I have put off longer than I ought to have done."

Bingley groaned. "I hate correspondence." Brushing the dust off his coat, he joined Darcy. "You have inspired me to see to the arduous task before I am buried in letters. See what a good influence you are?"

Darcy interrupted before he had to endure yet another expression of gratitude. "If you finish before the social hour, perhaps you would consider a call at Longbourn sufficient reward for your self-sacrifice?"

His friend brightened; his step bounced. "There is nothing I would like better."

Darcy, too, felt better about calling with Bingley accompanying them. He returned to the quiet of his room, where a few letters awaited his response — one from his land steward, one from his housekeeper, and another from his attorney. All of them seeking his guidance, wanting the decisions he was accustomed to giving them.

He looked at the sealed wafers, aware he was not up to the task when every ounce of his concentration was occupied with a greater problem. How was he to keep his distance from Miss Elizabeth?

# Chapter 21

Caroline Bingley twirled slowly, examining herself in the mirror and waiting for her sister's praise. Her evening gown was stunning, she knew, designed and stitched by a French seamstress sought by London's finest.

Louisa pinched her chin and pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing to examine every inch of her sister's gown, just as Caroline had requested. If she were to be the future Mrs. Darcy, she must look the part.

Feeling confident, Caroline pulled the gold overlay out and let the delicate fabric float back to caress her form. "What do you think?" she asked, her patience growing thinner the longer Louisa said nothing.

"Are you wearing the small rump pad?"

"Louisa!" Caroline felt her neck and cheeks burn red.

Her sister shrugged. "Rump pad, bum roll, bustle pad ... it is all the same thing. You know you are not particularly well endowed in that ... region ... and the regal effect of your gorgeous gown is ruined when it drapes limply from your shoulders without any"—she cupped her hands and lifted them up—"enhancement."

Caroline inhaled deeply, counting slowly as she felt her face cool.

"Do not be cross with me, Caro. You asked for my opinion, and I only have your best interest at heart. There is nothing I would like more than to see you settled well — be it with Mr. Darcy or some other gentleman."

What was this sacrilegious speech? "I *will* marry Mr. Darcy."

Louisa clasped her hands together and glanced at Duchess, who lay in the middle of her bed chewing on a leather glove. "Has he given you reason to hope?"

Caroline could count the ways. She only marveled at how her sister had missed them to have to ask. "He was excessively concerned over my ankle." When Louisa did not look convinced with this proof, she continued, "He did not wish to leave us behind to attend Sir William's dinner party."

"Did he say as much?"

"N-no. But he has been noticeably gloomy since the party. It must have been unbearable for him to mingle with those people for hours without any quality."

Louisa frowned. "He was every bit as concerned for Duchess' health as he was about your ankle, Caroline. And you cannot convince me he wished for our company at Lucas Lodge when he would not dream of us abandoning my precious jewel. He is incredibly sympathetic toward my little pet."

Caroline clenched her teeth together. Louisa could not mean to imply that Mr. Darcy was as attentive to her as he was to her miserable mongrel shedding and slobbering all over her bed's counterpane. She would not hear any more of this nonsense. "You are wrong. He knows the advantages I can give him."

Louisa looked at her with that annoying look of condescension she employed when she was about to say something Caroline did not at all want to hear. Louisa was a fool. Anyone who would settle for Mr. Hurst when he did not even have a title or fortune enough to repair his dilapidated country estate was not qualified to give her advice. "Caro, are you certain it is wise for you to continue in this same pursuit?"

Caroline did not dignify the question with a reply.

"You have known him for years. Do you not think that if Mr. Darcy preferred you above all other ladies, he would have proposed by now? There is also our connection to trade—"

"If that was an obstacle, do you think he would be so close to Charles? Others will use our connection to smear our name, but I never expected my own sister to—"

"But, Caro, you cannot deny that the connection is there. Our grandfather set us up with every advantage, but the mark is still there."

"Why do you think I have spent countless hours practicing the pianoforte with the best masters? Taken on the harp? Learned French with a tutor? Studied painting and drawing with artists who sell their work to royalty? I can walk and ride as fashionably as any belle of the *ton*." Caroline stopped to catch her breath.

Louisa never had been able to hold her own argument when they disagreed. She took a deep breath, speaking as she exhaled. "I only wish to spare you disappointment. You are a splendid catch for any gentleman, but I would rather see you settled than see you

waste any more time on Mr. Darcy. He does not look at you the way he does—" She clamped her lips closed and turned away.

Elizabeth Bennet. Louisa did not need to say it for the dreadful name to fill the room with its haunting echo.

Lifting her chin and straightening her shoulders, Caroline left her sister's bedchamber for her own. She had just enough time before dinner to change the small bustle roll to the bigger one.



\* \* \*

The meal had been perfect. The roasted lamb was tender on the fork, the juices flavorful. Caroline had planned every course to please Mr. Darcy, and every one had passed her approval. She took full credit for restoring his good humor. The conversation had been as plentiful as the wine, and she was smug in her success as she sauntered to the harp in the middle of the drawing room, content in the knowledge of how her figure showed to advantage with her arms stretched out before her at the instrument.

He had not eaten all of his plum cake, but that was easily explained. He must have been too full to eat more than the bite he had taken.

She leaned against the bronze frame, arching her neck and positioning her arms gracefully as she placed fingers delicately over the strings, looking beyond them to see if Mr. Darcy noticed.

He leaned down to scratch Duchess on the head. She sat on his feet, looking up at him in blatant adoration.

Caroline played with increased enthusiasm, but when Charles began boring them all with a description of his plans for the ice house, she came close to boiling. Who cared that the ice house had been neglected? How he aimed to fill it that winter with ice from Netherfield Park's ponds? How he had tidied the antechambers with sawdust over the hard-packed floors leading to the chamber? He

would monopolize the evening's conversation with estate matters if she did not intervene to entertain their guests.

Already, she could practically see Miss Darcy's eyes glazing over. Caroline could hardly blame her.

Fortunately, Louisa spoke. "Save your estate affairs for the billiard room or your daily rides, Charles. We have other guests who would rather not hear about your plans to improve a property which can never match Pemberley in its glory and beauty."

Charles chuckled. "I would never attempt to rival Pemberley. No, no, my tastes are far more humble than Darcy's."

The colonel sipped from his coffee. "It seems that your tastes are suited rather well here."

Charles grinned, his color rising. Clearing his throat with a flickering glance toward Caroline (who made certain to cast her best glare of disapproval) he said, "I would like to know my neighbors better, but anything I plan would need to be appropriate for Miss Darcy to attend, for though she is not yet out in society, I do not wish to exclude her."

Mr. Darcy bowed his head. "That is considerate of you."

Miss Darcy shook her head. "Nor do I wish to frustrate your plans when I am perfectly content to stay in my rooms. Perhaps Miss Maria might accompany me?"

"And the youngest Bennets!" Charles added.

Louisa hissed at him. "You forget they are all out."

"All of them?" he asked, agog.

Caroline glanced at Mr. Darcy, pleased to see him frown.

"You would not wish for their company anyway," Louisa continued. She was an exemplary sister when she and Caroline were in agreement.

Mr. Darcy's frown deepened the longer the topic remained on the Bennets. As he had been over the past few days, he grew sullen and quiet.

Caroline was delighted. She finally knew how to overthrow Miss Eliza from the undeserved pedestal on which she teetered.

Thus, the rest of the evening passed splendidly, and it was with a triumphant heart that Caroline retired to her rooms, where she put her plan to action with pen and paper at her writing table.

If the key to ending Mr. Darcy's little infatuation (for it could be nothing more) with Miss Eliza was more exposure to her atrocious family, then Caroline would afford the Bennets the opportunity to

exhibit the extent of their flaws.



## Chapter 22

"I wonder when the Bingleys will have a dinner party at Netherfield Park," mused Mama at the breakfast table. "They have been in residence for over a month."

"With Miss Darcy not yet out, they might hesitate to arrange anything so formal," Jane suggested.

Mama huffed. "Not yet out! And at sixteen. Why, at that age, I had already secured two proposals."

Hill entered the breakfast parlor then, holding a crisp, cream-colored envelope. He handed it to Papa.

Receiving any sort of mail was always an exciting event at Longbourn, but receiving a delivered message was special. Knowing their anticipation, Papa slowly took the missive from Hill's hand and read the writing on the front. Sitting up in his chair, he held it up. "This looks promising."

Mama leaned forward, and if she had not been seated at the other end of the table, she would have snatched it from him before he could reveal its contents.

With a chuckle, he handed the letter to Jane. "Perhaps you would like to read aloud, Janie? It is from Netherfield Park."

She cracked the wafer and unfolded the page before he finished saying her name.

Squeals echoed around the table. Elizabeth, too, set down her roll to better pay attention.

Resting her hand over her heart, Jane read.

It was an invitation to dine at Netherfield Park — an informal affair with only a selected few guests.

Mama squealed with delight. "We will have a wedding at Longbourn before the end of the year!" She looked pointedly at Jane, then fell to inspecting each of her daughters in view of the two remaining unmarried gentlemen also residing at Netherfield. "Mrs. Hill!" she called. "Where is the strawberry jam? I must have more!"

Mary excused herself from the table, but their mother would have none of it. She was to finish her breakfast and spend the rest

of the morning soaking her face in strawberry jam.

Preparations began at that moment, though the dinner was not until the following evening.

Elizabeth leaned closer to Jane, tilting the page to read. Miss Bingley's signature sprawled across the bottom. There was a sharpness to her letters. While Elizabeth was pleased with the invitation, she could not help but sense a nefarious undertone in Miss Bingley's writing.

Jane said, "How attentive of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst to include the Lucases when they were unable to attend their dinner party. No doubt they wish to show their gratitude for Sir William's hospitality even though they were unable to accept it."

Elizabeth bit her tongue. She was not nearly so kind as her sister and accredited Miss Bingley, who had thus far used every opportunity to exalt herself above their company in an attempt to raise herself up in society, with a far more self-serving motive. Elizabeth had little patience, and no sympathy, for individuals who used others' faults to raise themselves up. She realized that her greatest challenge in the evening ahead would be to keep her tongue in check lest her appreciation for the ridiculous encouraged her to knock the great lady down a peg or two.

Mama was nearly in vapors with her excitement, though she could not help a comment that she would rather Miss Bingley have invited Jane by herself so that she might send her on a horse in the hope that she would meet with rain, thus facilitating an overnight stay.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Mama was not mercenary in her tactics to marry her daughters. Not a cruel bone was to be found in her body. However, what she lacked in cruelty she displayed in great abundance with incredible lack of tact. While Elizabeth appreciated that her heart was in the right place, for society was indeed very cruel to spinsters – specifically spinsters with no money of their own – she could not help but hope that their hosts would not take offense at her blatant attempts to marry off her daughters to whichever gentleman were willing to take them. That she would make several such attempts during the course of the evening, Elizabeth was certain.

Papa rose from his seat to pen a reply for the messenger to convey, grateful to depart from the commotion.

Kitty and Lydia bounced in their chairs, exclaiming, "Officers in

Meryton and gentlemen at Netherfield Park! How fortunate we are!"

Mama, forgetting to reserve the strawberries for their complexions, slathered a spoonful of jam over a roll and took a healthy bite.

Elizabeth's nerves spread taut. A small party meant more intimate conversation, more lulls between topics — necessary pauses, which her mother and Lydia would feel the need to fill with whatever unfortunate comment happened to be on the tips of their tongues. Neither of them was malicious, but their tendency not to give thought to their utterances before giving them voice meant that their conversation tended to the vulgar.

Tapping Lydia under the table with her toes, Elizabeth begged her to be on her best behavior.

Lydia leaned into Kitty. "You did not tell her?"

"Tell her what?" Kitty replied.

With an irritated twist of her lips and an exaggerated roll of her eyes, Lydia addressed Elizabeth. "We saw Miss Darcy at the circulating library yesterday." She smiled and shimmied in her chair, looking satisfied that Elizabeth would understand how chancing upon Miss Darcy in Meryton would secure her best behavior.

Elizabeth did not understand. "So?" she prodded.

"We had a lovely chat, did we not, Kitty?"

"Very lovely."

That explained nothing. Elizabeth was about to press further, but they rose from their chairs to skip about the table and chant, "To London we shall go!"

"Not London, dears, but Netherfield Park," Jane corrected them, to which they winked at her and carried on about London.

There was no sense to be got from those two, and Elizabeth dared not ask Mary, who already looked miserable with their mother smearing what little jam remained on her bread over Mary's nose.

"Mama, do you know what they are talking about?" asked Jane.

Their mother dabbed away at Mary. "Such a lovely girl. So generous, as a young lady in her position ought to be. She is a credit to the Darcy name"—dab, dab—"and so beautiful, too. She will put you girls in the way of handsome gentlemen."

Elizabeth caught Jane's eye, her own shock reflected in her sister's fair eyes. Their mother never praised other ladies. Not that

she was stingy, but her loyalty to her offspring and her devotion to securing their matches simply did not allow for her to admit to another lady's advantage while her own daughters were unmarried.

Lifting Mary's chin, turning her face side to side to inspect, Mama heaved a contented sigh, looked down at her smashed roll, shrugged, and popped the last bite into her mouth, calling out instructions for Mrs. Hill and the maid between chews.

Mary retreated to her room, leaving Jane and Elizabeth in the quiet, empty breakfast parlor.

"Mama is pleased," Jane said, her voice strained.

Elizabeth breathed deeply to settle the butterflies whipping her stomach into a nervous frenzy. "We will make the most of it, Jane, as we always do." She would laugh and make light of everything which might embarrass her sister before Mr. Bingley and his pernicious sisters, and Jane would smile so prettily, he would soon forget their family's behavior.



\* \* \*

After an entire day of primping and preening to satisfy their mother, Elizabeth walked up the steps of Netherfield Park beside Jane, trepidation quivering in her stomach.

They were shown into a parlor facing the front of the house, and Elizabeth felt relief wash through her when she saw Charlotte sitting by the fire. Mr. Bingley's sisters conversed with Lady Lucas while Sir William and his two sons, both between Charlotte and Maria in age, chatted with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Hurst. Mr. Darcy, ever the attentive brother, stood beside his sister and Maria, pretending to take an interest in their conversation as much as any man can enjoy the conversation of two girls of their age. The sight made Elizabeth smile.

Mr. Bingley stopped pacing in the middle of the room when he

saw Jane.

They greeted their hosts, after which Elizabeth joined Charlotte on the settee.

"Charles, I need your opinion," snapped Miss Bingley.

He looked apologetically at Jane before he departed to assist his sister. It was an obvious separation, for Miss Bingley possessed enough opinions of her own to also require those of her brother.

Elizabeth and Charlotte made room for Jane on the settee, and the three settled in for a quick *tête-à-tête* before dinner was called.

Charlotte tilted her head toward Lydia and Kitty. They flanked Mrs. Hurst, chattering at a respectable volume. "That is a surprising development," Charlotte said.

Elizabeth looked closer as her sisters presented Mrs. Hurst with arrangements of colorful bows. "We noticed how you match your darling dog's bows to match your gowns, so we made her these."

Mrs. Hurst was in raptures, and Elizabeth's shock grew as both Kitty and Lydia listened attentively without interruption as the lady talked at length about her dear pet.

"To what or whom do we credit this miraculous change, I wonder?" Charlotte whispered.

"I know not, but it makes me nervous," Elizabeth replied.

Jane nodded, speechlessly watching as their mother joined Miss Bingley and Lady Lucas without a single vociferous exclamation or interruption. A full minute must have passed before she spoke, and then it was to reply to a direct question Lady Lucas posed to her.

Elizabeth, Jane, and Charlotte exchanged looks full of astonishment.

Charlotte's gaze flickered over to Miss Darcy. Pinching her chin, she mumbled, "Could it be...?"

Miss Darcy could not have heard the question, but at that precise moment, she looked over to their settee, her impish smile making Charlotte chuckle. "I never thought her bold enough to take on Lydia and Kitty, but she has done it. And Mrs. Bennet seems to have benefited as well."

Elizabeth recalled what Lydia had said about their lovely chat with Miss Darcy at the breakfast table the day before. "What could she possibly have said to them?"

Charlotte clasped Elizabeth's hand, dropping her voice so that only her immediate companions heard. "I do believe, my dear Lizzy, that Miss Darcy has decided to encourage her brother's interest and

make you her sister."

Elizabeth sucked in a shaky breath; her stomach plummeted to the ground. Mr. Darcy was a decisive man who would resent coercion from anyone — even from his sister. She could not imagine a better way to discourage his affection than manipulation.

She had not yet composed herself when dinner was announced, leaving Charlotte's claim to repeat in her mind like a hue and call proclaiming a disaster she hoped to prevent.

Twenty place settings dotted down the length of the table, accented by polished silver gleaming in the candlelight and beautifully arranged pine boughs tied with satin ribbons and exotic fruit around the candelabras. Elizabeth was pleased to see the evidence that Miss Bingley did not intend to exclude her younger guests — those not yet out in society — to suit society's strictures. For a lady who appeared to be in all ways genteel and proper to overlook decorum to please Miss Darcy proclaimed said lady's devotion to her pursuit of Mr. Darcy. Pemberley must be as grand as Elizabeth had heard.

Being a guest of insufficient rank to merit a higher placing, Elizabeth contented herself with her spot at the middle of the table where she could better overhear the conversation at both extremities.

"What a beautiful table, Miss Bingley," Mama complimented.

Miss Bingley preened. "We sent for a few trifles," she said, flickering her fingers to both call attention to the oranges nestled between the pine needles and modestly claim how the extravagance was no trouble. "...along with our French chef."

Papa's wry tone overwhelmed the delicate, delighted gasps from the guests around the table. "How fortunate for us."

Mama, not hearing his sarcasm, added, "Yes, indeed, we are most fortunate. Such a lovely spread as I have not seen since Lady Lucas' dinner."

Lady Lucas appeared as shocked by the compliment from her rival as she was pleased by it.

Elizabeth was stunned. Not even one tasteless comment or inappropriate insinuation had been uttered by anyone in her family since setting foot inside Netherfield. Her father's sarcasm aside, they behaved as properly as she could wish them to. It was disconcerting.

Papa observed Mama with interest, too. She had always

possessed a special talent for encouraging conversation, but to see her act so graciously, so becoming a gentleman's wife, was extraordinary.

Miss Bingley cleared her throat, interrupting Lady Lucas. "Pemberley boasts not only a French chef, but also a pastry chef besides a baker."

Georgiana smiled openly at Mr. Darcy. "My brother has a fondness for sweet things."

"Like my Lydia!" exclaimed Mama.

There it was. Elizabeth had feared this gentility would not last, but to have her sister compared to a sweet thing Mr. Darcy might want to gobble up was mortifying.

Mama seemed to realize her blunder, calling attention to the flush covering her face by fanning herself with a napkin. "What I meant to say is that Lydia also possesses a sweet tooth. Lizzy is always bringing her treats from Meryton."

Elizabeth pressed her eyes closed and wished herself anywhere else but there, for though Mama did not know it, she had cut her hostess most effectively by bringing up memories of the last time she had attempted to bring a wrapped biscuit to Lydia. Elizabeth felt a heavy look on her and opened her eyes to see Miss Bingley's nostrils flared and her cheeks in high color. She remembered the biscuit, too.

Elizabeth avoided Mr. Darcy's gaze at all costs.

Mama continued, blissfully unaware of what she had done. "Not that our cook lacks by any means. Longbourn's pantry is never stark."

Miss Bingley lifted her chin. "You will never taste a more perfect tart than those from Pemberley. The strawberry are my favorite."

"Strawberries are good for the complexion," Mama informed her.

Mary touched her nose, as though to make certain she had not missed a spot.

Papa observed, "One can never have too many strawberries."

"Of course, you are right, Mr. Bennet. We never seem to have enough of them. Such a large, fine estate as Pemberley never suffers these inconvenient deficiencies." Mama heaved a sigh, Longbourn's lack of the summer fruit weighing heavily on her. "They have the best of everything, I am sure."

So unexpected was Mr. Darcy's voice in their exchange, Elizabeth startled when he spoke. "Except for plum cake. That

honor, I must cede to you, Mrs. Bennet." He accented his compliment with a bow of his head.

Elizabeth was nonplussed.

Mama wiggled in her chair. "I would be happy to share the receipt with your chef."

"I would be in your debt."

He had to know her offer included an acceptance of his offer of marriage. She had told him as much in Longbourn's drawing room the day of the puppy incident.

To have Mr. Darcy in Mama's debt was such a terrifying thought to consider, an idea shared by everyone seated at the table as evinced by the silence which consumed the occupants of the room.

Miss Bingley glared daggers at Mama.

Before her mother could remind Mr. Darcy precisely how she hoped he might pay such a debt, Elizabeth broke her silence. "It was a pity you could not attend the dinner at Lucas Lodge. Is Duchess fully recovered?"

Mrs. Hurst, ready to share the misery she suffered at her baby's plight, was eager to expound on Duchess' sudden illness, treatment, and recovery to health. She had a rapt audience in Mama, who understood her anguish entirely.

Elizabeth felt Mr. Darcy watching her. She wished she could read his expression, know for a certainty why he frowned. She did not know what troubled him, but she felt it all the same. Did she somehow remind him of the lady he had lost?

As the courses were served, and his conversation became more compulsory, she felt his pain like a kick to her stomach. A sadness reached its fingers out and touched the edges of her heart.

She was losing her heart to a man who was unable to love her as she craved. She could not bear to always be compared to the lady responsible for his melancholy; to always be second when, in her mind, he was foremost.

She could be his friend, but nothing more.

Her mother and sisters had behaved beautifully at dinner. Miss Bingley looked pinched and peevish, frustrated in her attempt to elevate herself through their faults. Elizabeth ought to have gloried in her family's triumph. But she found it difficult to feel any cheer when the bright future she dreamed of with a man who knew her better than any other was beyond her grasp.



# Chapter 23

Darcy stared into his drink, lost in his thoughts as he had been through most of dinner.

The gentlemen allowed it, indulging in brandy and palaver: Bingley with Mr. Bennet, Richard with Sir William, and Mr. Hurst with the two Lucas sons.

Assured his contemplations would not be interrupted, Darcy compared and contrasted the two ladies foremost in his mind. Miss Bingley represented all his society held in high regard. She was considered properly polite and polished. Elizabeth was often improper, but she was kind, sincere.

Miss Bingley took herself and everyone around her seriously, just as Darcy did. He had convinced himself that severity was synonymous with dignity, but he could not call Miss Elizabeth's light touch and easy laughter undignified. She was a breath of fresh air, who put her companions at ease. Georgiana talked more in her presence.

Miss Bingley used every occasion to elevate herself above others. Darcy smiled as he recalled his conversation with Miss Elizabeth, who had taken a dramatically unique approach with him. He was certain it would never occur to her to raise herself above her company when she would rather tease and laugh with them.

Miss Bingley had been raised by the finest governess money could secure. She had uninterrupted access to the masters and best tutors. Miss Elizabeth had none of that, but what she had learned was through her own observant nature and ingenuity.

In short, one had all the accomplishments with none of the goodness; the other possessed all the goodness with none of the advantages. Darcy knew whom he favored.

Darcy had yet to meet Miss Elizabeth's equal. He doubted he ever would.

She was his match. He knew it with a certainty that pierced his bones and dispelled all doubt. She was the pepper to his salt. The lightning to his thunder.

She was perfect.

But would he suit her? Would she benefit from a union to him as much as he would from her?

He could easily overlook her family's lack of decorum. They had clearly exerted themselves this evening, lending Darcy the hope that they would continue to improve given frequent access to higher society. At least their fault stemmed from ignorance, which could be remedied, and not maliciousness, which could not. His stomach sank like a leaden weight. While he could grant the Bennets some levity, society would be harsh. His family would be unforgiving.

Miss Elizabeth had never pandered to him as others did who hoped to benefit from his generosity. She was not a fortune hunter. This, he knew. But society would cast their own ambitions on her, maligning her character undeservedly. His own aunt Catherine would oppose her.

Every bit of cheer Miss Elizabeth infused into his life would be tainted and twisted against her by the circles into which he was born. She was strong. She was unintimidated by him. But was it fair to put her in the position of taking on the whole of a disapproving society, including families who had known his for generations and whose approval Darcy had always taken for granted?

He could think of no worse cruelty than submitting her to a life where her freedoms would always be questioned and criticized while they openly pitied him his choice.

He downed the contents of his glass in one choked gulp, grateful when Duchess' bark distracted him from his resentful thoughts.

Mr. Hurst scowled and refilled his glass, mumbling, "It is almost enough to put a gentleman off his port."

Darcy had difficulty imagining anything standing in the way of Mr. Hurst and his food or drink.

Sir William nodded at the decanter. "Excellent port, this. Lady Lucas has a pug, you know. The sweetest-tempered dog that was ever born. Not the brightest flame in the candelabra, but she is an excellent companion to my wife."

Mr. Hurst raised his glass to his lips. "I like pugs. I encouraged Mrs. Hurst toward a more temperate breed, but once she learned that Princess Charlotte's favorite dog was a Maltese she called Lioni, she would hear of no alternative."

The talk turned to St. James for a few minutes, as it was oft to do while in Sir William's company. Once he had regaled them with a spirited account of his brush with King George, Bingley rose from

the table. "If you have drained your glasses, gentlemen, might I suggest we join the ladies?"

Richard bounded to his feet, no doubt eager to join Miss Lucas.

Truth be told, Darcy's eagerness to see Elizabeth again far outweighed the bitterness he had felt at the obstacles preventing them from ever being anything more than passing friends.



\* \* \*

Elizabeth tried to ignore Duchess' plaintive barks. It must feel like the greatest punishment in the world for a social puppy eager to explore her world and meet new friends to be closed up in a room with the sounds of laughing guests and smells of delicious food taunting her with what she was missing.

Kitty must have had similar thoughts. She said, "Duchess is so perfect and white and fluffy. What a darling pet she must be."

Mrs. Hurst was eager to agree. Her longing gaze shifted to the door, where it remained.

Lydia pooched out her bottom lip. "Poor, dear puppy. She must be incredibly lonely all alone these past few hours, waiting for her mistress when there is no good reason why she may not enjoy our company as well."

Miss Bingley gasped. "A dog at a dinner party! She would shed fur all over our gowns."

God forbid.

"She does not shed. It is one of the advantages of the breed," Mrs. Hurst defended.

Charlotte pinched her lips and tilted her chin the way she did when she was about to say something so completely rational, she could not be refuted. "If you were so gracious to include the younger ladies into your party, perhaps you might concede to including Duchess."

Elizabeth bit the insides of her cheeks. How she adored Charlotte.

Miss Darcy added her argument in favor of Duchess. "It is only fair. If we are all in agreement, what harm could it do?"

Elizabeth watched Miss Bingley's face contort into a forced smile, while Mrs. Hurst sent a maid to carry Duchess to them (lest the darling get lost along the way).

Miss Bingley's face was still pinched when the maid returned, carrying the squirming dog to Mrs. Hurst.

Clutching her angel in her arms, Mrs. Hurst struggled to keep her trapped in her embrace when Duchess strained against her. Wriggling free of her mistress' grasp, she dropped to the ground.

"My little angel!" Mrs. Hurst gasped. "Are you hurt, darling? Do come to Mama!" She lunged after her dog, but Duchess was determined to dart from one end of the drawing room to the other, pink tongue lolling out of her smiling mouth, hair billowing and swaying with every bounce of her paws off the carpet. She ran as though an unwanted suitor were pursuing her with an equally unwanted proposal, and Elizabeth cheered her on.

Miss Bingley was not amused. "You see? She is likely to run under someone's feet. She will trip one of our guests and be trampled upon; then you will wish you had heeded me."

"She will settle. Only give her a moment," Mrs. Hurst replied.

Kitty and Lydia laughed, tapping their legs and snapping their fingers to get Duchess' attention.

As Miss Bingley had predicted, the darting dog scrambled between Mrs. Hurst's feet, nearly tripping the lady when she bent to scoop up her precious pet. "There now, my sweet, that is quite enough exertion. You will make yourself ill," she scolded. When they had returned to their chair, and Duchess was securely tucked under Mrs. Hurst's arm, she introduced her pet to the ladies she had yet to meet.

Duchess panted and grunted while Maria and Mary inclined their heads in lieu of curtsies, and Lady Lucas proclaimed she must arrange a party for Duchess and her own pet pug, Bella.

The gentlemen entered as they were planning what sort of biscuits and sweetmeats would be most appreciated by their furry family members.

Mr. Bingley reached over to pat Duchess. "Ah, now I understand to what we owe Her Grace's silence. I do hope she is behaving?"

Pulling Duchess out of her brother's reach, Mrs. Hurst defended her. "My little angel is a perfect lady and has behaved with the utmost decorum ... once she settled."

Elizabeth bit her lips together. The tiny dog shook and trembled in Mrs. Hurst's arms, and though the lady kissed and stroked and patted her, speaking soothingly all the while, Elizabeth feared the poor darling would suffer an apoplexy being so suddenly exposed to so many new people all at once. If only she could be allowed a bit of freedom to sniff about and acquaint herself with her new friends.

"Perhaps it would calm her to be allowed to sniff about the room," Mr. Darcy suggested.

"But she bites!" Miss Bingley exclaimed before she remembered herself and amended her outburst. "She does not trust easily."

"She only snaps at you and, occasionally, at Mr. Hurst," her sister added. "She is perfectly agreeable to everyone else." As if to show how harmless Duchess was, she set her gingerly at her feet.

The Maltese took off across the room, nose to the floor, ears up. She sniffed her way over to Mary, who leaned down to pet her and got several licks on her cheek in thanks. She must like strawberries.

She then sniffed over to Maria, Kitty, and Lydia. Plopping onto her back, she waved her paws in the air until they indulged her with a belly rub.

"See how sweet-tempered she is?" Mrs. Hurst gushed.

Duchess sensed she was the center of attention and, smart creature that she was, she took full advantage of her opportunity to prance prettily before every member of their party (except, of course, Mr. Hurst and Miss Bingley, who got low growls) to secure scratches and rubs along with the appropriate compliments to her splendid self.

By the time she made a full circle of the room, Mr. Bingley had found his way to Jane's side. Charlotte was occupied with her sister and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Elizabeth joined her father, Sir William, and Mr. Darcy, telling herself (quite convincingly) that it was her father's conversation she sought. They discussed a topic of which most gentlemen claimed to be experts: horses.

She glanced humorously at her father. He never rode a horse if he could more comfortably travel in a carriage.

Sir William rested his hands on his protruding stomach. "It has been many years since you joined us, Mr. Bennet. I had forgotten

what an accomplished horseman you were."

Elizabeth gaped at him. Her papa? A horseman?

Sir William caught her look. "You do not believe me? Then allow me to recall one instance of his skill. Perhaps you know the hedge at the bottom of my property? It is hilly terrain, and a stream runs along the length of the hedgerow."

"I know it well." How many times she wished there was a more direct path through the thick hedge than the opening with the footbridge nearly a mile out of her way.

"It is a challenge to jump at five feet, but your father took the jump on the rise where the hedge was eight feet if it was an inch. Sailed over it like a bird, he did."

Papa chuckled, his eyes bright and his face looking ten years younger. "Like all good stories, the height of the hedge has grown along with the telling."

He and Sir William chortled together.

"Those were good days," Sir William said.

Looping his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat, Papa sighed, "Yes, it was a small sacrifice to make for the tranquility of my wife."

"You gave up riding for Mrs. Bennet?" Mr. Darcy's voice betrayed his shock.

"A gentleman must give up many things when he marries," Papa said, adding in a lower tone, "Once it became apparent we would not have an heir, she began to take my welfare more seriously than she had before."

This was news to Elizabeth. She had thought that his disinterest in sport had been a result of his progress in years, not consideration for his wife. It was a very pleasant sort of thing to know.

Sir William nudged Mr. Darcy. "Enjoy your freedom while you may, sir. We cannot be so careless when there are others who depend on us."

Mr. Darcy smiled and bowed his head, though Elizabeth could not imagine him ever being careless. He already had a sister who relied on him, and if the rumors were true, he also had half of Derbyshire with all of its tenants and farmers to manage.

She was beginning to feel sorry for Mr. Darcy's plight when the irony of her own situation as opposed to a gentleman's struck her. While a young man could live as dangerously as he pleased, that same union presented the greatest danger to the welfare of his

bride. Too many women were claimed during childbirth, and while Elizabeth could not profess proficiency on the topic, she understood enough to know there was little a wife could do to prevent bearing children once she shared a bed with her husband. Talk about injustice!

If anyone ought to be allowed the liberty to enjoy some of the diversions gentlemen took for granted before they wed, it ought to be the maidens of the world. These thoughts she kept to herself. One did not speak of childbearing at all, and they certainly did not bring up the topic to a circle of gentlemen who would not sympathize with a woman's plight. Except for Mr. Darcy. His mother had died too young. Then, his father only five years ago. He would not take death lightly. He took nothing lightly. Was that why? Elizabeth wondered. She tried to imagine how she would have reacted had she lost the tender touch and well-meant direction of her own mother at an impressionable age. If she had then become responsible for the lives and livelihoods of so many only a year after completing her majority. To always be looked to for answers.

She did not realize she stared at him until his eyes met hers. Embarrassed, she quickly looked away.

Closer to the fireplace, she saw Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst whispering. Their gazes often traveled to the settee, where Jane and Mr. Bingley sat comfortably in each other's company.

Elizabeth sighed. She hoped Jane enjoyed her conversation with Mr. Bingley, for it was soon to be cut short.

Surely enough, Miss Bingley turned to address the room. "I brought several sheets of new music with me from town, and it would be a pity not to put them to good use." Her eyes snapped over to Jane. "Miss Bennet, might I especially request your assistance turning the pages?"

Jane was too polite to refuse, and while Elizabeth was sad for her, she also took immense satisfaction in the look of longing with which Mr. Bingley followed Jane's progress across the room to the pianoforte. He watched her through the entire performance.

Charlotte sidled over to Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam following shortly to join the gentlemen and offer his opinions on his most recent finding at Tattersalls.

Quietly, Charlotte said, "Jane has made quite the conquest. Mr. Bingley has eyes for none other than her."

Elizabeth blushed, aware that while the colonel was discussing horseflesh with Sir William, he was also close enough to overhear Charlotte.

"Jane is equally smitten," she said.

Charlotte pursed her lips and watched Jane as she poised herself to turn the page for Miss Bingley. "You and I well know her character, that her calm exterior conceals a depth and warmth of feeling. However, it would not hurt her to encourage him a little. To give him some indication that she returns his regard."

Elizabeth stifled a laugh. "If Mr. Bingley does not see her regard, then how could he claim to know her character enough to declare himself in love with her?"

The colonel leaned toward them, his ear inclined in their direction. He did not say anything, but Elizabeth knew he had been listening when his mood became more contemplative and he observed Jane and Mr. Bingley intently, as though he were attempting to see what was so plain to Elizabeth.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Mr. Darcy engaged in a quiet conversation with her mother and Lady Lucas. Elizabeth had not noticed him leave her father and Sir William, and now she wished she would have seen how the two intrepid mothers had trapped the poor man between them. They had backed him into a corner, and the hopeless look he cast her when their eyes met begged her to come to his rescue.

Covering her mouth, for she had already laughed a great deal too much at his expense, she backed toward the cluster to the tune of Miss Bingley's rapturous finale.

She turned to clap as Miss Bingley lifted her chin and smiled condescendingly at her audience. *Yes, Miss Bingley, you are an accomplished player who would put the rest of us to shame were we inveigled to display at the pianoforte.*

Jane took the sheets from the podium, tapping them to align the pages before closing them together on top of the instrument. With a returning smile at Mr. Bingley, she stepped back. *Yelp!* Jane twisted with a cry, "Duchess!"

Miss Bingley moved the bench back, provoking another yelp from the trodden pup who attempted to flee the legs of the bench and Miss Bingley's skirts by darting through Jane's feet.

Elizabeth ran across the room, but it was too late. In an effort to avoid injuring the delicate creature any more than she already had,



Jane contorted herself in such a way that she now lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, her hand clasping her ankle and her eyes glazing over with pain. Her breath came in short bursts.

Kneeling beside her, Elizabeth asked, "Dear Jane, how bad is it?"

Blinking her eyes several times, Jane forced a smile. "How clumsy of me," she said, assuming the blame, her eyes seeking Mrs. Hurst's beloved pet and asking when the lady scooped her dog into her arms, "Is Duchess well?"

Mama shoved her way through the bodies gathering around Jane. "My dear! My precious girl! What a terrible accident to befall you!" She clutched Mr. Bingley's arm as though she might swoon, her eyes tearful and beseeching. "She cannot possibly return to Longbourn in her current state, I am sure you will agree, Mr. Bingley."

Jane attempted to scramble to her feet, and Elizabeth winced along with her when it became apparent to all that she was not fit to put any weight on her injured ankle.

"Of course, Miss Bennet is welcome to stay here until she is fully recovered."

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley. How very agreeable and attentive of you," Mama purred.

Miss Bingley balked rather loudly.

Had the scene not been such a comedic tragedy of colliding tactics, of which her own mother had far greater experience and much more of an invested interest than Miss Bingley, Elizabeth might have laughed. But Jane was mortified. Elizabeth could not laugh at that.

Mr. Bingley stepped forward and, together with Papa, they gently lifted Jane to her feet and carried her to the nearest chair while Mother praised Mr. Bingley's hospitality and worked herself into a frenzy of nerves over the slight possibility that her eldest daughter, the one on whom all their hopes rested, was to be forever maimed.

Elizabeth forced her eyes to focus on Jane to keep from rolling them. Their mother's restraint was a flimsy dam, and now, all of her nervous vexation and motherly ambition burst forth in a flood of obvious hints and suggestions.

Miss Bingley's protests became louder, and Mr. Bingley's concern became so great, he offered, despite the late hour, to send immediately for the apothecary.

Unwilling to risk Mr. Jones proclaiming before all of their party that Jane's injury was not so grave as she hoped, their mother insisted he wait until the morning, once her daughter had secured a night at Netherfield Park.

With one of her offspring hoisted onto the Bingleys' hospitality, Mama declared herself fatigued and in need of her nerve tonic. Papa declared it was time for them to depart.

With a parting wink and a pinch of Jane's chin to remind her of her duty to her family, Mama looked about the drawing room and declared it most satisfactory, the perfect surroundings in which to recover.

Elizabeth embraced Jane, whispering into her ear, "Are you so badly injured? I do not want to leave you in this state."

She pulled back, but Jane did not release her hold on Elizabeth's hands. Mouthing the words so there was nothing for their mother to overhear, she said, "Do not leave me, Lizzy."

However, Mr. Bingley, whose eyes had been captivated by Jane all evening, did not miss the exchange. Proving himself eager to make himself useful and his guest comfortable, he said, "You are welcome to stay as well, Miss Elizabeth. No doubt Miss Bennet would be more at ease with you here."

The imploring look in Jane's eyes convinced Elizabeth, although the brief look she exchanged with Mr. Darcy was the most persuasive. Bingley turned to him for counsel. In a tone brooking no argument and eyes sparkling with restrained laughter, he said, "Of course, Miss Elizabeth must stay with her sister."

His humor appeased Elizabeth's distress, and any shame she felt for her mother's barefaced behavior disappeared.

Miss Bingley's peevish scowl was icing on the cake.

# Chapter 24

Elizabeth's dress swirled around her feet, and a tiny, white ball of fluff with a pretty yellow bow breezed by her down the stairs. Duchess caught Mr. Darcy by the door to the breakfast parlor. Stepping aside to allow her to pass, he said, "My lady," with a swooping bow.

A giggle escaped Elizabeth, and she caught him with a sheepish expression before he assumed complete composure and straightened up to his full, intimidating height. When she was near the door, he stepped aside once again, swooping another bow (though not so grand), mumbling a dignified "Madam" as she passed.

Duchess sat on a chair at the table like a little person, looking expectantly at Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.

"Should we serve her a plate of kidneys?" Elizabeth asked.

Mr. Darcy chuckled. "Where Duchess is, Mrs. Hurst is soon to appear. She never lets her baby out of her sight."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I wonder if she escaped then. Your mama will be too cross to share a kidney with you if that is the case," she warned the puppy.

With several happy yips, Duchess pranced in her chair, her tail wagging so enthusiastically, her entire posterior moved with it.

"Little troublemaker," Mr. Darcy grumbled, cutting off a small piece of meat to feed to the delighted dog and revealing the softness of his heart despite his attempt to conceal it.

He lifted a lid off the platter of the sideboard. "How fares Miss Bennet?" he asked.

"I suspect she will be well enough to return to Longbourn before the passing of a week." No matter what their mother wished, neither Elizabeth nor Jane would stay a day beyond what was absolutely necessary.

"Has the apothecary seen her?" He cut another bite of meat and fed it to Duchess. She really had him wrapped around her little paw.

"Mr. Bingley sent for Mr. Jones, but he has yet to arrive." It occurred to Elizabeth that Mr. Bingley might just as well have sent

for Mr. Herriot with this kind of injury. She might have to send to Longbourn for some of his ointment.

Replacing the lid of the platter with a fumbling clang, Mr. Darcy said, "There is an urgent matter I must see to immediately," and promptly left the room.

Staring at the empty space he had occupied, Elizabeth wondered if everything was always so serious and urgent to him. When was the last time he played a game for the fun and enjoyment of it?

Duchess watched the door through which he had disappeared, tilting her chin from side to side and whining over her feeder's sudden departure.

Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders and prepared a tray for herself and Jane, buttering the rolls and spreading generous dollops of fruit preserves over them. It would be a joy to eat jam without the worry that Mama would spread a good portion of it over her skin.

"My sweet girl! Where is my precious snowflake? My little crumpet?" Mrs. Hurst called, her voice getting shriller with each summons.

Elizabeth met her at the door. "She is in here, Mrs. Hurst. Safe, sound, and two bites of kidney richer."

Mrs. Hurst's hand hovered over her heart. "Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. She escaped from my room when the maid tended to the fireplace." Holding out her hands, she rushed to Duchess' side. "My darling muffin, how afraid you must have been, wandering the house all alone! Did you miss your mummy?"

Grabbing the tray, Elizabeth retreated upstairs, humming a tune until she reached Jane's door, her humming and her feet coming to an abrupt stop.

There was a jar in the center of the opening to Jane's room. Mr. Herriot's ointment.

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat, releasing in a laugh. Had this been Mr. Darcy's important matter? What a sense of humor he possessed, if it was!

She took every opportunity to roam over Netherfield so that she might ask him, but though she roamed the hall between her and Jane's guest rooms and went down to tea, she did not see him again until the following morning in the library.

He sat in a chair near the windows overlooking the rose garden. It was not much to look at now in the winter months, but it would be in the summer.

"Is your sister improved?" he asked, closing his book and laying it on the table beside his chair.

"Mr. Jones says she will need to keep her foot raised until the swelling goes down completely ... and a few extra days for good measure. He instructed her to wrap it before she attempts to walk on it." She stayed where she was near the door, uncertain. Should she stay or should she go?

Shaking her head at herself, she walked to the nearest bookshelf. She had come to fetch a book to read to Jane, and she saw no need to change her purpose merely because Mr. Darcy also occupied the library.

"She is in no danger of being permanently maimed? I am happy to hear it." Elizabeth heard the smile in his voice.

"Not at all." She turned to face him. "Mama will be overjoyed to learn it. Although, she must be happy enough to know we will have to impose on Mr. Bingley's hospitality until the swelling lessens."

He rose, crossing the room to her, his smile gone. So serious. "May I ask a direct question without giving offense?"

He was much too serious for her. Arching her eyebrow, she replied, "That would depend on the question. It takes a great deal to offend me."

"Pray advise me which topics to avoid then."

Elizabeth pretended to ponder, though the answer was on the tip of her tongue. "Anyone who demeans my family is an enemy to me."

He bowed his head. "Familial loyalty is an admirable trait."

Flippantly, she added, "And I do not take kindly to insults against my vanity."

Another bow and a grave, "Naturally." His eyes smiled now.

She laughed aloud. "You being a gentleman, I cannot imagine you committing either offense, so ask away, sir. I only hope my reply proves satisfactory."

He flinched as though she had slapped him, not made a joke.

When he spoke again, the twinkle in his eye was gone. "You give me more credit than I deserve."

She did not understand him, nor did she wish to add to his pain by asking for an explanation.

Clearing his throat and crossing his arms over his chest defensively, he said, "Bingley is amiable and trusting — much more than he ought to be."

Elizabeth nodded, relieved that his concern lay in Mr. Bingley and not some offense of her own or her family's.

He continued, "As his friend, I feel I must offer him a measure of protection."

This she understood clearly. She felt the same about Jane.

"Bingley's heart is vulnerable. He falls in love easily and has been unfortunate to have his heart broken several times."

Mr. Bingley, heartbroken? Had Elizabeth been mistaken? So many questions popped into her mind, but the first that made it across her tongue was the one that most concerned Jane. "Is he too generous with his affection?" She did not hold her breath long.

"No. He is always sincere, and I am convinced that when he finds a lady who returns his affection to the same degree, he will be a loyal husband."

Elizabeth was not entirely convinced. Furthermore, she saw what he implied. Slowly, narrowing her eyes, she asked, "You suspect my sister does not return his affection equally?" *Careful how you answer, Mr. Darcy.*

"I have been watching her, and his attachment seems stronger."

All that proved was that Mr. Darcy did not yet know Jane, and that perhaps Charlotte had been right to warn her. And just like that, the light shone on the real culprit in this conversation. Colonel Fitzwilliam had relayed that conversation to his cousin, and evidently, one of them (Elizabeth leaned toward Mr. Darcy) believed Jane indifferent. While the realization offended her more than she was willing to let on, she also sensed an opportunity she could not pass up to once and for all prove to herself who the heartbroken one of the trio of gentlemen was.

Cautiously, she said, "And you fear she will break his heart like all the others..."

He nodded. "I do not mean to imply any insincerity on your sister's behalf. I only wish to help him avoid any misunderstanding."

She liked this explanation much better. Feeling bolder, she asked, "Is that why you came here? To help Mr. Bingley overcome a heartbreak?"

He bowed his head, eyes fixed to the ground. "No. I had ... other reasons."

"And how are you faring, Mr. Darcy?" she asked before she could stop herself.

He did not look up. He did not flinch or breathe.

Sensing she had crossed the line, which was as much of an affirmation as she was likely ever to get, she tried to shake the discomfort she had caused him. "Allow me to put you out of your misery and answer your question. Jane loves him, at least as much as and, quite likely more than, he claims to love her."

He finally looked up. "Forgive me for pressing, but I have seen no proof."

What further proof beyond her own assurance, along with Charlotte and the colonel's, did he need? Elizabeth snapped, "Neither has Mr. Bingley given any proof of his constancy, by your own account." She paused, letting her words sink in until he could feel the shame of uttering them. "Mr. Darcy, I choose to believe that your intentions for interfering in his affairs are noble, as befits a gentleman of your status, but this is a conversation for Mr. Bingley and Jane to have."

Spinning on her heel before she said anything else she might later regret, she left the library and marched to Jane's room. Plunking down with a heave onto the chair beside her bed, she huffed. "Insufferable man."

Jane looked at her blankly, and down at her sister's empty hands. And that was when Elizabeth remembered she had forgotten to bring a book back. She had also forgotten to ask about the ointment.

They took their dinner on trays that evening. She saw no more of Mr. Darcy that day, and every time his words repeated, grating in her mind, she was not sure she wanted to see him ever again, though she often roamed the halls in the hope of chancing upon him. Contrary man!



\* \* \*

Elizabeth woke before Jane the following morning. After making a

few arrangements, she walked out to the gardens.

And straight into Mr. Darcy.

He grabbed her arms, steadying her when she bounced off his chest. The man was as sturdy and unbending as a brick wall.

"I apologize, Miss Elizabeth," he said, his breath short and quick.

She shook her head, shaking his hands off her arms. "I took the corner too quickly—"

"For interfering," he interrupted. He took a deep breath and a step back, looking at her in that disconcerting way that made her heart flutter. "It was presumptuous of me, and I will not do it again. I did, however, encourage Bingley to make wise use of Miss Bennet's time at Netherfield Park to make certain not only of her heart's inclination, but his."

Elizabeth so badly wanted to pick at his words, to quarrel, but he had apologized. Mr. Darcy would not apologize easily, nor did she imagine he often had to do so. There was nothing left for her to do but accept his olive branch. "I forgive you."

She heard him exhale, but the air around them was still too heavy. Mr. Darcy was too grave. "Was it you who sent Mr. Herriot's ointment?" If that did not provoke a smile, she did not know what would.

The corners of his lips curled up along with the edges of his eyes. He had a beautiful grin. "Is it helping?"

"I would not be surprised if the swelling goes down enough for Jane to leave her bedchamber on the morrow."

"Bingley will be happy to hear that."

She cast him a look, and he raised his hands in innocence. "Not interfering, merely passing along valuable information." With his hands held up in front of his guilty face, Elizabeth struggled to stifle a laugh.

A flash of rust orange and the swish of stiff silk drew her vision to the opposite end of the garden. Miss Bingley. She had seen them.

Mr. Darcy glanced over his shoulder. "I had better leave." He took a step around Elizabeth.

She gasped. He would leave her with Miss Bingley? "You would not!"

When he arched his brow, he looked dashingly mischievous. "Why not? You are perfectly capable of managing Miss Bingley."

"That does not mean I wish to."

"You would persuade me to join you to share in your misery?"



She lifted her chin pertly. "Misery loves company ... and she will not extract her claws so long as you are here."

He turned, mumbling something that sounded a lot like "You owe me," but Miss Bingley was upon them. She panted as though she had been running all over her brother's house in search of them. "Miss Eliza, I am surprised to see you out of doors when your sister's injury is so delicate."

Elizabeth smirked up at Mr. Darcy. Miss Bingley's hint for her to leave was anything but subtle. She had the perfect excuse to abandon him to Miss Bingley's charms. It would serve him right for her to leave them.

She knew he read her thoughts. He clenched his teeth, the muscles at his jaw working. Was that panic in his eyes?

They stared each other down, exchanging taunts and threats with no need for words. Miss Bingley looked back and forth between them, her heightened color clashing with her gown.

Sweetly, Elizabeth said, "Jane was still sleeping when I left, but I am certain the tray I left beside her bed will keep her occupied until I return."

The path through the garden was conveniently wide to allow the three of them to walk together. Miss Bingley clutched Mr. Darcy's left arm. To Elizabeth, he extended his right arm, along with such a look of gratitude as to make her almost forget their earlier quarrel. Humility suited him.

# Chapter 25

The Bennet sisters lightened the atmosphere at Netherfield Park, and Darcy found himself looking for reasons to stay indoors when every argument of good sense dictated he ought to have stayed away from Miss Elizabeth. He did not fail to notice how Bingley did the same with Miss Bennet. The only exception was Richard, who Darcy was certain often rode in the direction of Lucas Lodge when he ventured out.

Miss Bennet's injury limited her mobility, but it did not prevent her from enjoying company, which conveniently provided sufficient excuse for Miss Lucas to call with Miss Maria. Darcy noted how Richard did not ride out on those days.

On the Bennet sisters' fourth day at Netherfield Park, Miss Bennet was recovered enough to be conveyed in a chair carried by Bingley and his strongest footman. While Bingley would have been happy to carry her to any room of her choosing, at any time she desired, Miss Bennet declared herself content to remain in the music room for most of the day. Georgiana had promised to play for her, and she had convinced Miss Bingley to arrange a nuncheon where they could eat and play and converse in greater comfort.

Darcy had decided to attend to his correspondence in the music room. He could have accomplished a great deal more in the solitude of his room, but he would show his approval of his sister's boldness with his presence (or so he repeatedly told himself). If Miss Elizabeth engaged him in conversation, so be it. She was a young lady of many opinions, and Darcy delighted in hearing them. If he were fortunate, they might enjoy a debate. He could count on her to rise to a challenge, defending her position deftly.

Miss Bingley was always nearby, hovering like a hawk, ready to strike. She circled around the music room that afternoon, looming over her guests (except Duchess, who growled if she drew too near). The rain prevented Miss Lucas and Miss Maria from departing. Miss Bingley was the only one who seemed eager for them to leave when everyone else was content to use the rain to their advantage. Crossing behind his chair again, trailing her fingers along the back,

Darcy wondered if she would keep her distance if he growled at her. It worked for Duchess....

Miss Bingley finally sat beside her sister on the other side of the room. The two whispered to each other behind Mrs. Hurst's embroidery hoop. Everyone else laughed and conversed, making it impossible for Darcy to continue with his letters. In the last half an hour, all he had written was a salutation.

Miss Elizabeth looked past him to Bingley's sisters. "Perhaps you would like to join us in a game?"

Miss Bingley looked as though she could imagine nothing worse than engaging in any activity which might remotely resemble fun with her present company.

Georgiana and Miss Maria clapped their hands. "Oh, yes, please do," they implored in unison.

Eager to please Georgiana, Miss Bingley promptly changed her attitude. She was delighted to join them.

Miss Maria asked, "Do you have spillikins? I do love a good game of spillikins."

"I had Mrs. Hill pack it in my trunk. It is a favorite in our family, and it has helped Jane and me pass the time most agreeably. I will fetch it," said Miss Elizabeth, slipping out of the room.

Miss Bingley chortled. "Oh my, it has been ages since I played that. It is so ... juvenile."

Miss Lucas jumped to her younger sister's defense. "Why deny ourselves the wonder and whimsy of youth when we ought to encourage it? I hope I never tire of good, innocent fun."

*Well done, Miss Lucas.* Darcy glanced over at Richard. The colonel beamed at her, the tender expression in his eyes confirming Darcy's earlier suspicion.

Georgiana added, "Oh, yes. My brother used to spend hours playing spillikins with me when he came home from school..." She paused, meeting his eyes and grinning mischievously, "...until I began winning, at which point he promptly ceased to indulge me."

Darcy burst into laughter, his sister's reply so unexpected, it delighted him all the more.

Miss Elizabeth returned, opening the cylinder in her hands and shaking the sticks. "Who will join us for the first round? Since there are many of us and only one set of spillikins, might I suggest a championship? The winner keeps playing until she loses?"

Darcy's head shot up. "You assume the winner will be female?"

Her eyes glittered. "The odds *are* in our favor."

At that, Richard and Bingley both stepped forward, rubbing their hands together, preparing for battle. Mr. Hurst, overcome by excitement, had fallen asleep by the fire.

Darcy taunted, "We shall see if skill will triumph over the odds."

Miss Elizabeth lifted her chin. "You imply that a gentleman's skill is greater than that of the ladies?"

"You delight in misunderstanding me when in truth I said no such thing. I well know that to triumph at spillikins, one requires a steady hand and patience — virtues which are more commonly instilled in the fair sex and too often disregarded by the male population."

The colonel elbowed him. "Speak for yourself. I aim to win."

They gathered around the table, playing four at a time. Round one began with Georgiana, Miss Maria, Miss Elizabeth, and Darcy. This left Mr. Hurst to snore, Duchess to sniff under the table, and Richard, Bingley, Miss Bennet, and Miss Lucas to cheer and jeer. Miss Bingley sat stiffly by her sister, still determined to prove herself above the childish game.

Georgiana laughed so much, she fared poorly. Miss Maria performed well, but she was no match for Miss Elizabeth. When the game ended and she plucked the last stick from the tabletop, she had the same number as Darcy. Arching an eyebrow, she said, "I suppose both of us must move on to the next level."

Richard and Miss Lucas joined them then, and though the teasing increased, the results were the same. Darcy tied with Miss Elizabeth. Despite his claims, Richard lost abysmally with only two sticks.

Bingley moved the table closer to Miss Bennet so that she might join in the fun, but given her immobility, she was at a great disadvantage. Bingley was too distracted at her nearness to do much better than Richard had on the last round, and so Darcy and Elizabeth faced off against each other.

Darcy moved around the table, looking for the best angle and trying not to be distracted by his charming foe.

She watched him, an impish smile spreading over her face. "You take the game rather seriously."

"The reputation of mankind is in play."

"I doubt anyone outside this room will hear of your defeat."

He met her eyes. "You are so confident you will win?"

She shrugged. "Would you wish me for an opponent otherwise?"

He nodded. "Fair point. I would not. One's skill is only challenged when facing one's equal or superior."

He felt Richard's and Bingley's eyes on him. He did not see why they should react so surprised. While his statement might sound flattering, he merely stated a fact. Miss Elizabeth had matched him on every round, meaning she was at least as steady-handed as he was. That he had not been able to beat her suggested she might be his superior.

She beat him by one stick.

He was about to suggest another round when Miss Bingley sauntered over. "I have another idea for a game we shall *all* enjoy. Are you familiar with forfeit?"

Miss Maria was not, so Miss Bingley explained the rules briefly. "One person is selected to be the judge. The other players put a personal item — a forfeit — into a pile on the floor behind the judge, where the judge cannot see it. Another individual holds one forfeit item above the judge's head while the other players say, 'Heavy, heavy hangs over thy head. What shall the owner do to redeem the forfeit?' The judge then commands the owner of the item to pay a penitence to retrieve their forfeited item."

Georgiana added for Miss Maria's benefit, "The penitence can be something simple like singing or dancing or reciting a verse of poetry, or something more embarrassing like braying like a donkey or crawling on all fours like a dog."

"It sounds very diverting," Miss Maria said hesitantly.

Mrs. Hurst suggested that since the game had been Miss Bingley's idea, she ought to be the first to judge. She offered herself to hold the first item over her sister's head. The remaining players discarded their forfeit into a pile behind Miss Bingley.

Darcy knew the game was rigged when Mrs. Hurst held up the wrap Miss Elizabeth had been wearing.

Miss Bingley looked about the room as they recited the chant, as though she had no idea her sister had singled out Miss Elizabeth.

She proclaimed her penitence as her gaze settled on each one of the players. "The owner shall sing and play for us. When her — or his — performance earns the applause of the audience, she — or he — will earn back the forfeited item." She fixed on Miss Elizabeth, her smile turning into a sneer.

Bobbing a curtsy with a glint in her eye that would have made a

lady with more sense nervous, Miss Elizabeth went to the pianoforte. She fluffed her skirts dramatically, already beginning her performance, and sat with great flourish at the bench. Straightening her posture and poising her fingers dramatically over the keys to the laughter of her audience, she began playing a lively tune which she accompanied with a pleasant voice.

Darcy soon forgot their company and the circumstances which had led to Miss Elizabeth's exhibition. Her manners were so engaging and her skills so enthusiastic, she would have done credit to herself at any one of the balls Darcy had attended.

The performance was over before he was ready. Darcy clapped eagerly. Even Mr. Hurst woke to applaud, adding his voice to their clamors for an encore.

Continuing her act, Miss Elizabeth swooped deep curtsies before she dropped her persona of a prima donna and skipped and laughed over to her place at the table.

With a tight smile, Miss Bingley handed Miss Elizabeth's wrap to her, ending their group's congratulatory exclamations and praise when she told her sister to raise another item above her head.

Mrs. Hurst chose Darcy's pocket watch. He prayed he was not asked to sing and play. He only knew one half of the songs he had helped Georgiana practice years ago. And all of those songs were so high pitched, made for his sister's soprano, he would sound like a croaking frog if he attempted them.

"The owner shall declare to their true love. When her — or his — declaration is made and he — or she — receives a kiss in response, then they will earn back the forfeited item."

The room fell silent. Darcy would have preferred to sing.

"I-I cannot support this scheme," Bingley said. "This is a dangerous game, Caroline."

Miss Bingley waved his warning away. "Hush, Charles. It is all in good fun."

"Not when you force a declaration," he argued.

Duchess nudged Darcy's leg, and he leaned down to scratch her favorite spot under her chin when the perfect idea struck him. Lifting the ball of fluff in his arms, Darcy said in his most dignified tone, "My Lady, Duchess of Hurst, you have captivated my heart and, therefore, I bequeath it to you if you will condescend to accept me."

She licked his chin, accepting his declaration enthusiastically.

Richard roared. "You must allow her one duck egg a week in the contract!"

Mrs. Hurst added, "I would not dream of accepting any less than two duck eggs a week for my little darling!"

Everyone laughed except for Miss Bingley. She stormed out of the music room.

"That was brilliant, Darcy. I did not think you had it in you!" Bingley exclaimed, clapping him on the back.

Georgiana giggled with her friends. It was the most beautiful sound he had heard since Miss Elizabeth's pert performance. Darcy nodded his thanks to the songbird. He never would have thought to end Miss Bingley's cruel game with humor before Miss Elizabeth.

Darcy smiled at her, and he felt the moment he completely and utterly lost his heart to the woman who smiled back at him.

## Chapter 26

"Do you think Miss Bingley is watching through the window for our carriage?" Elizabeth asked, full of mischief and relief and sadness that today was the day she and Jane would finally depart Netherfield Park for Longbourn.

Sadness because their mother would sorely disapprove that Jane's injury had merely led to deepened friendships rather than hasty engagements. Elizabeth herself could not be sad, but she knew how much Jane would have liked such a happy ending. And, truth be told, Elizabeth would miss bumping into Mr. Darcy. She would also miss Georgiana's constant company. She could not, however, claim the same for Miss Bingley, and even her sister, Mrs. Hurst. Therein lay the source of Elizabeth's mischief, for while Miss Bingley seemed intent on besting her, the lady's plans had only made her look conniving and ridiculous. For the past couple of days, Elizabeth could not take a bite of food or sip of wine without wondering if the mistress of the house might have poisoned it. Thus, Elizabeth's relief at departing. As much as she enjoyed the Darcys, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr. Bingley's company, she also valued her life. And she had no doubt that she had made herself, through no effort at all on her part, Miss Bingley's mortal enemy.

"I pity her," Jane said. "She is accustomed to outshining every other lady in the room, but she has been unable to gain the notice of the one man she seeks to impress."

"Why, Jane"—Elizabeth tossed a pillow at her sister—"you are excessively wise this morning."

"I am not very wise, Lizzy, but a person would have to be blind not to see how she pines for Mr. Darcy"—she eyed Elizabeth—"and how Mr. Darcy prefers you."

Elizabeth's heart jumped into her throat, making her cough. What a thrilling — and terrifying — prospect. She liked Mr. Darcy very much. Loved him even. But his friendship had been extended to her in good faith, and she refused to abuse his confidence. She refused to expose him to the caprice of a society who would surely disapprove of her, her family, and her want of connections and



consequence. She respected him too much for that when his heart had so recently suffered a blow.

Not knowing how to reply to Jane without revealing the contents of her heart, Elizabeth asked, "Will you mind having her as a sister very much, Jane?"

Jane colored prettily. "I will not pretend that I do not prefer Mr. Bingley above all other gentlemen. There is nobody, nor will there be any other gentleman, I admire more than him. Having to manage his sister is a small price to pay for a lifetime of happiness." She looked up, her smile growing along with the rare glint in her eye. "I have lived with four sisters of varying temperaments, besides our often-vexed mama. I feel as though my one and twenty years promoting peace in our household has prepared me to deal effectively enough with Mr. Bingley's sisters."

Elizabeth threw her arms around Jane's shoulders, relief and pride at her sister's quiet strength pouring forth from her. "Oh, Jane, I can hardly wait to see how you manage them."

Jane leaned against her. "He has yet to ask, Lizzy. Let us not get ahead of ourselves."

As far as Elizabeth was concerned, it was only a matter of time before he did finally ask, but for Jane's sake, she held her tongue. Planting a kiss on her sister's cheek, she rose to peek out into the hall. Their trunks were packed and ready and only waited for the arrival of their father's carriage.

A maid hustled by, bobbing a rushed curtsy when she saw Elizabeth.

"Is the carriage arrived?" Elizabeth asked.

"I hardly know, miss," the girl replied, looking around her as she spoke.

A wail echoed down the hall, provoking a cry from the maid as she gathered her hands in her apron and proceeded down the hall at a rapid clip.

Elizabeth stepped into the hall, trying to discern from which bedchamber the cry had come. Was Miss Bingley frustrated that their carriage had not yet taken them away?

A footman topped the stairs just as the door to Mrs. Hurst's bedchamber burst open. Mrs. Hurst stumbled forward, the hand she held over her mouth doing little to soften her cries. Her red, swollen eyes searched the corridor. "Have you seen her?" she demanded.

The footman froze in place, "I am sorry, madam, I have not."

A fresh burst of sobs encouraged Mr. Hurst to console his inconsolable wife.

The footman sidestepped toward Elizabeth. "Your carriage has arrived, miss," he said softly.

She would have liked nothing better than to depart, but she could think of only one incident which would inspire this violent reaction from Mrs. Hurst, and Elizabeth could not bear to think it possible. "What has happened?" she asked.

Equally cautious, the footman mumbled under his breath, "Duchess has gone missing."

The air hissed out of Elizabeth's lungs. It was just as she had feared.

Jane hobbled gingerly over to the doorway. "Is it Duchess?" she mouthed.

Elizabeth nodded.

"We must help find her."

Elizabeth agreed. Turning to the footman, she said, "The trunks are ready, and we will be down shortly, I hope. First, we must help Mrs. Hurst."

The hall crowded as Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, Mr. Darcy, Georgiana, and the colonel joined them.

"All the servants are looking, Louisa. She must have wandered into one of the rooms, that is all," Mr. Bingley said, holding his bereaved sister up with his arm while she clung to her husband with the other.

"She has been kidnapped. I just know it!" she wailed.

"Nonsense, Louisa," Miss Bingley said, her gaze flickering over to Mr. Darcy. "This situation only requires rational thought and organization. We will conduct a search ourselves."

Mr. Bingley caught sight of Jane standing without the support of his arm, a sight which clearly distressed him when she had spent the past five days recovering her strength after her accident. "Ja — Miss Bennet, you will injure yourself further. Please, I insist you rest while the rest of us search, or I will be uneasy for your welfare."

Looking pleased with his concern, she acquiesced, but Elizabeth caught the devilish look which so rarely glinted in her sister's sweet face. "I would not dream of adding to your concerns. Someone must stay here in case Duchess returns to her rooms, and I can just as easily sit in a chair in the hall as I can inside my room."

Mr. Bingley relinquished his sister's arm he had been supporting,

so that he could arrange Jane's chair himself.

Elizabeth stepped forward. "Where would you like for me to search?"

Miss Bingley scowled at her. "Will you check the kitchens and downstairs where the servants are?" she asked, suggesting that was where she considered Elizabeth belonged, with her dismissive tone.

While Miss Bingley sent everyone else in their party to search the house in sections, Elizabeth asked Jane if there was anything she required before she left.

"We have not yet returned the books to the library, but the maid will know where they go."

Perfect. Elizabeth would follow through with her search assignment, but she was in no hurry to follow Miss Bingley's instructions. Besides, she had a better chance of finding Duchess in the library than she did downstairs, where one of the servants would surely have stumbled over Duchess by now had she been there. "I will return them right now."

Grabbing the books, she made her way to the library to the tune of Netherfield's gentlemen shouting all manner of endearments.

"Precious Crumpet!"

"My Lady!"

"Sweet Angel!"

"Little Muffin!"

Under less grievous circumstances, Elizabeth would have laughed at the sound of their deep voices uttering the tender epithets. But Mrs. Hurst's one tender spot was her beloved pet, and she dreaded to think Duchess harmed. Mrs. Hurst was so vigilant in protecting her dog, Elizabeth feared she might be correct that someone had kidnapped her, knowing a handsome ransom would be paid for her safe return.

The curtains were still drawn in the library, but enough daylight seeped through the edges to show the empty slots waiting for their books to be replaced. Elizabeth put them where they belonged, turning to leave, when a scratching noise brought her steps to a halt. She held her breath.

*Scratch, scratch*, she heard again. Over by the wall, behind the large couch, in the darkest corner of the room.

"Duchess?" Elizabeth called.

The scratching continued. There was no bark or whimper, just the scratching. She did not think it could be Duchess, but she would

wonder if she did not make certain.

The scratches got louder the closer she drew to the couch.

Crouching down to the floor, careful not to hit one of the thick tables scattered around the furniture, Elizabeth squinted her eyes in the dark. A movement ran against the back of the wall.

"Duchess?" Elizabeth called, images of the poor puppy cowering hurt in a corner softening her voice.

She crawled along the floor, her eyes fixed on the spot where she had seen the movement and wishing she had thought to pull the curtains.

"Duchess," she repeated, patting the carpet with her hands.

Two green eyes flashed, and the shadow darted down the length of the couch. A rat!

Elizabeth shrieked, jolting up to her feet and hitting her head on the corner of the table along the way. She pressed her hand against her head; the ache blurred her vision. The room swayed. She reached out blindly to steady herself, tripping against the floor and falling into a warm, soft place.



\* \* \*

Darcy pulled Elizabeth to his chest, trying to gain better footing before they both toppled to the ground and looking about for what had caused her to scream.

*Scream, crack!* That horrible sound replayed itself in his mind as Darcy cradled her against him and looked down into her pale face. He had caught her just in time.

"Elizabeth?" he whispered against her hair.

"Hmm," she mumbled.

A sound behind Darcy made his blood chill. Silk skirts swishing. "Mr. Darcy, what are you doing in the library? I thought I clearly said I would search this room," Miss Bingley crooned when she

knew very well that she had sent *him* to the library to search.

She continued, "Oh, my! I believe we are alone—"

He spun around, one arm cradling Elizabeth's head against his chest and the other wrapped intimately around her waist, holding her up.

"Oh!" Miss Bingley did not sound so content now. Even in the dim light, he saw her complexion pale then darken until he thought she would blow.

Mrs. Hurst burst into the room, declaring between hiccupped sobs, "Compromise! I declare a compromise!"

"Hush, Louisa," hissed Miss Bingley.

Both ladies turned to him. Elizabeth's eyelashes fluttered, widening when she regained her senses with a gasp.

Darcy's arms froze around her, refusing to let go, though all of his better sense screamed at him that he must step away.

All he could think was that if he was to be compromised, he was grateful it was with Elizabeth Bennet.

## Chapter 27

*Not like this! Never like this!* Elizabeth pushed against Mr. Darcy, and he immediately dropped his arms. She stepped away, needing the distance before she convinced herself to ruin everything by tumbling back into his warm embrace.

Blinking hard and breathing deeply, she focused on Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. "There has been no compromise. I hit my head and Mr. Darcy caught me seconds before Miss Bingley entered the library."

Silence.

"Promise me no mention of compromise will leave this room," she insisted.

Miss Bingley was quick to promise, as was Mrs. Hurst. Their best interest was secured in their silence. They would not break their promise.

Elizabeth could not look at Mr. Darcy. She could not bear it if she saw relief.

He reached out to her arm, close but not touching, and she resisted the temptation to sway toward him. Tears stung her eyes, and all the words she could not say, had no right to say just then, choked her throat.

This would not do. She refused to cry in front of Miss Bingley. And she refused to show how affected she was to Mr. Darcy.

"Very well, then. We had better find Duchess," she said, grateful her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

Before anyone could say a word, she fled from the library.

Miss Bingley's maid paced the hall. She stepped to the side to allow Elizabeth to pass, but something in the girl's manner — her bowed head, her apron twisting in her hands, her nearness to the library door — made Elizabeth stop.

"I know what Miss Bingley arranged," Elizabeth said, wishing the harsh words unsaid the moment they crossed her lips but now committed to seeing her accusation through.

The maid continued twisting her hands in her mangled apron. "It is done then? She is engaged?"

Ire dried Elizabeth's tears, evaporating any sympathy she might have had for Miss Bingley. She had heartlessly attempted to entrap a man while he was still vulnerable. "She is not," Elizabeth said plainly, her wrath so great she came close to forgetting how her accident had happened in the first place. How she had inadvertently spoiled Miss Bingley's design against Mr. Darcy.

Duchess.

The timing of the events of that morning was too convenient for Miss Bingley not to have orchestrated the dog's disappearance. Did the maid know? Did that explain her continued nerves? Stepping closer to the girl, Elizabeth said, "If you tell me where she hid Duchess, I will not tell her brother or Mr. Darcy what she arranged." Though they would be fools not to know already.

The maid spoke quickly, as one relieved to be free of a horrible secret. "She is in the ice house. Please do not tell Mrs. Hurst."

"She does not know?"

The maid shook her head.

Now that was interesting. Mrs. Hurst had to be aware of Miss Bingley's plan, given her willingness to play a role in it while her dog was supposedly missing. But clearly, she did not know the whole of it. Elizabeth had to give the lady credit: she was an excellent actress. Her display of panic was superior even to Mama's. She wondered how Mrs. Hurst would react when she learned that her sister had rewarded her performance by stuffing her beloved pet in the cold, damp, dark ice house.

"Please do not tell her," the maid repeated. "I need this position."

Elizabeth sighed. While Miss Bingley deserved every punishment coming her way, she did not wish to pay the guilt-ridden maid so cruelly. Miss Bingley would send the girl packing. "I will find a way to explain how I found her without implicating you." That was all she could promise.

She darted down the hall, down the steps, and through the kitchen at the back of the house. The ice house was not far, so as to accommodate the servants who had to cart the blocks of ice to the kitchen.

A mound rose in front of her. Steep stairs led down to a thick door Elizabeth was grateful to find unlocked. She pushed it open, the chill seeping into her skin and shivering through her.

No happy bark greeted her.

Softly packed sawdust lined the antechamber leading to the

deep pit where the ice was housed, but Duchess was nowhere in sight.

Dear Lord, Miss Bingley was not so cruel as to hide the little dog inside the ice chamber, was she? Elizabeth crossed the antechamber, heedless of the dust coating her boots and skirts, and shoved the heavy door open with her shoulder.

It was dark, but leaving the doors propped open allowed her to see the tiny, white figure. Two big, brown eyes looked up at her in supplication.

Elizabeth cried, "You poor dear!" and in one swoop, scooped the scared puppy into her arms. Duchess curled into her, her trembling calming as Elizabeth held her close to her chest.

The doorway darkened, and Elizabeth looked up to see Mr. Darcy standing in the antechamber.

"You found her," he breathed, unbuttoning his tailcoat.

It took Elizabeth a panicked moment to understand him. But then he reached out to take Duchess from her, tucking her under his arm and wrapping the broadcloth around her, sharing his warmth.

"How did you know to come here?" he asked.

"I asked the maid. You?"

"The sawdust sticking to Miss Bingley's gown."

Elizabeth grinned. Miss Bingley's maid was safe. The same could not be said for Miss Bingley when her sister found out what she had done. "We had better return her to her mama." She stepped toward the door, closer to Mr. Darcy.

He did not budge. His eyes captured hers, his mouth open, his breath puffing into clouds.

Elizabeth took another step forward, pulled to him. She could feel his warmth, feel his breath stirring her hair, brush against her forehead, tickle across her cheeks.

Her mind screamed at her to move, to run away from the ice house. To so nearly escape from one compromise only to be caught in another was the height of folly. But her feet simply would not move.

She lifted her chin, her eyelids closing, her mind empty of every thought outside of the ice house ... and Mr. Darcy ... and her.

His lips caressed hers, light like downy feathers sending sparks through her limbs.

She rose to her toes, eager for his touch ... and was greeted with a face full of fur. Duchess wiggled between them, alternately licking



them, and effectively ending their moment.

Elizabeth laughed, embarrassed at how forward she had acted.

Colonel Fitzwilliam's voice boomed from the stairs above. "Darcy? You had better not have fallen into the pit," he said good-naturedly. "You were gone longer than — Oh! Well, that explains a great deal." He tipped his hat at Elizabeth. "I see you were in good company. I trust neither of you fell victim to the cold when you had each other to keep yourselves warm?"

Elizabeth's face burned. Had he seen anything from the top of the stairs? Her mother would be extremely proud of her — putting herself in a position of compromise two times with the same gentleman.

"We found Duchess," she said, hating how guilty she sounded.

The colonel did not look away from his cousin. He crossed his arms over his chest, eyebrows raised.

Mr. Darcy — Fitzwilliam — met his bold glare levelly, the muscles at his jaw twitching.

Elizabeth did not know how much they communicated, but her galloping heart knew how her fate and future rested in their hands. She would love nothing more than to spend day in and day out with Fitzwilliam. But she wanted to be his choice. His *first* choice.

Finally, Colonel Fitzwilliam nodded gravely and uncrossed his arms. "Very well," he said. "Your secret is safe with me ... for now." He eyed them both, his smile spreading. For once in her life, Elizabeth could not smile.

As much as she would have loved to reveal Miss Bingley's cruelty to her sister, she could not stay a second longer at Netherfield Park.

Leaving Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam to return Duchess to Mrs. Hurst, she stormed up to Jane's room and tried not to show her frustration when her sister could not take the stairs as quickly as Elizabeth would have liked.

"What is this? What has happened?" Jane asked.

"Later," was all Elizabeth could say.

Jane followed her willingly, asking no more questions. She was the best sister in the world.

Their carriage was ready and waiting. Elizabeth was grateful they had already expressed their gratitude and said their farewells.

The conveyance jolted forward. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around herself, wishing they were Fitzwilliam's.

# Chapter 28

Darcy followed Bingley's cries of "Sugar Plum! Sweet Angel! Darling Cream Puff!" until he found his friend at the far end of the upper corridor. "Bingley!" he said.

A loud bang, then Bingley appeared out of a doorway, rubbing his head and wincing. "Has Duchess been found then?" he asked, adding when he took in Darcy's stormy demeanor, "Dear Lord, what else has happened?"

Darcy gritted his teeth, trying to gain some semblance of calm. Not since Wickham's attempt to elope with Georgiana had he been this angry. "I must speak with you. Now."

Folding his hands in front of him, Bingley's attention was momentarily distracted by Richard's appearance.

"No bloodshed yet. Good! I am not too late," the ingrate said with a smirk.

"Bloodshed?" Bingley choked, looking between them and paling when it dawned on him that he was the one Richard had supposed would be bleeding.

Richard stood between them, one hand on each man's shoulder. "This conversation is urgent, but it is best had in the privacy of your study."

Bingley's eyes widened. "Oh!"

They marched to Bingley's domain, as silent as pallbearers. Darcy was too busy managing his rage to speak. Bingley was too befuddled to utter a word. And while Richard gave every appearance of enjoying the scene, he was not so foolish as to tease about it.

Bingley closed the door behind them, going immediately to the sideboard where Richard was already pouring drinks. Handing a glass to Bingley, he said, "Sit. Drink."

Bingley did as he was bid, still clueless.

Darcy paced, unable to sit.

Richard extended another drink to him, but at Darcy's glare, he placed it on the desk instead.

Richard spoke under his breath, "I do not know the whole, but it

appears that Duchess' disappearance was staged by your sister in an attempt to arrange a compromise with Darcy."

Bingley's jaw dropped. "Sh-she d-id what?" He shoved his hands through his hair.

Darcy took a deep breath. "She sent me to the library, then slipped into the room on the assumption I was alone—"

"You were not alone, though? There was no compromise after all?" Bingley interrupted.

Darcy cast Richard a look of warning. Who knew how much his cousin knew, but Darcy would not break his promise to Elizabeth — on either of their two compromises. "Fortunately, I was not," he continued before they could ask who was with him. "However, it was plain that Miss Bingley assumed I was alone. She commented on it as soon as she entered the library. Whatever she had planned was ruined when she realized we had company. Before any of us could proceed with our search, Mrs. Hurst burst into the room, declaring a compromise had been made."

Bingley dropped his head into his hands. "I never thought she would stoop so low. I apologize, Darcy. Had I known she was capable of such trickery, I never would have invited you to join us."

"She must be dealt with."

"I will. I will talk to her. And Louisa." He rose to see to the task at that same moment.

Darcy placed his hand on Bingley's arm, stopping him. After his conversation with Elizabeth, he had to be certain Bingley was the sort of man who would make a worthy husband of Miss Bennet. He would not make her happy for long if he allowed his sisters to trample all over him.

"For your sake, and for Miss Bennet's, I hope you are firm."

The expression on Bingley's face told Darcy he required further clarification.

"If you do not show your sisters — especially Miss Bingley — that you are a capable master, she will always overstep her boundaries. She will walk all over you, and she will treat the lady you choose to marry poorly, assuming she will suffer no consequences."

Bingley blanched. "I cannot allow that. Jane is too kind; Caroline would make her miserable."

Darcy nodded. He had said what he needed to say. The rest was up to Bingley.

"What should I say?" Bingley asked, looking to Darcy for guidance.

"That is for you to decide. It does not pertain to me to interfere in matters of your household. Only, I beg of you that you attempt to be the man you wish to be for Miss Bennet."

A smile spread over Bingley's face and his chest puffed. "I will. If I cannot act in a way that will make her proud, then I do not deserve to ask for her hand. I will do it." Like a soldier racing to battle, he left.

Richard clucked his tongue. "I wish him well."

Darcy wished him well, too, but he had to speak with Elizabeth before she left. He did not know what he would say, but he had to say something. To assure her.

His heart plummeted. What exactly would reassure her? That he would not press her to marry him if she did not want him? That he would behave better should they ever have each other's company forced upon each other?

What a fool she must believe him! Had Duchess not interrupted him, he would have kissed her fully, and Elizabeth would have had every right to slap him across the face. As vehement as she was about denying their compromise — twice! — Darcy expected that was exactly what she would have done.

He did not know Richard had followed him until he stood in front of the empty guest chambers and felt his firm hand squeeze his shoulder. The maids stripped the beds of the linens to wash.

Elizabeth was gone. She had left.

Richard steered Darcy away, and Darcy let him. She had left before he could make amends. Before he could repair any of the damage he had done.

Finding himself in his room, Richard pulled a silver flask from his coat pocket and handed it to Darcy.

Darcy took it, sitting heavily by the fire and drinking deeply.

With a chuckle, Richard said, "I would have loved to see the look on Miss Bingley's face when she realized her plans were for naught." He took the flask, shuffling the silver between his fingers. "I take it that Miss Elizabeth was the one with you?"

Darcy nodded. Richard had proved himself capable of keeping secrets. "She was already in the library when I entered. Something must have startled her, for I heard her scream, and in her haste to retreat, she bumped her head against a table. I caught her before

she hit the floor."

"That is brilliant! Miss Bingley must have been apoplectic to arrange your compromise only to see her foe in your arms!" Richard's face turned red as his laughter deepened. "And her sister shouting 'Compromise!' I bet she could not shush Mrs. Hurst quickly enough." He slapped his knee.

Had Darcy not been so miserable recalling Elizabeth's stern denial, he might have laughed at the ridiculousness of his predicament. "She does not want me," he said into the embers of the fire.

"She did what?" Richard sat forward.

"Eli-Miss Elizabeth swore us all to secrecy. She does not want to marry me."

Leaning back in his chair, Richard sighed. "There is nothing worse than falling for a woman who does not return your love."

Darcy looked at his cousin. How insensitive he must have seemed to Richard. His cousin had needed sympathy, a listening ear. Not urgings to rally as though his affection could be shaken off as easily as a dog shaking mud off its fur. "I am sorry, Rich. I could have been more understanding."

Smiling through his sigh, Richard tucked his flask inside his pocket. "Darcy acknowledging an error? You must really love her ... and I am not convinced she does not return your affection."

Darcy swallowed hard. As much as it hurt him to think Elizabeth lost to him, it hurt more to hope. "She was adamant in her refusal."

"Of a compromise, not a proposal. There is a vast difference."

"The end is the same. When Mrs. Hurst called out the compromise, I-I had never known such relief. My heart soared. I want to marry her, but ... maybe it is better this way."

"You cannot believe that!" Richard's face burned red with passion. "Better for whom?"

"Surely, you can see how impossible it is. She would become the brunt of society's cruelty. They would never forgive her, considering that I had married down. Our own family would turn on her. Your father, our aunt."

"Your entire life you have lived up to — and exceeded — our family's expectations. And what has it done but make you haughty, insensitive, and unhappy. Must you marry to please them, too?" He flailed his arms about him. "Of what use is your privilege if you cannot use it to marry the one woman who has effected this

change? The one woman you love?"

Darcy clutched his stomach. He could not breathe.

Richard pressed on, "Would you be happy with a woman like Miss Bingley? All accomplishment and no heart?"

No. A thousand times no.

"Furthermore," added Richard, leaning back and tapping his chin philosophically, "you have your legacy to think of."

Darcy grimaced. That was a great deal of the problem.

"Not the legacy of your predecessors, you fool," Richard snapped. "Your legacy. Would you rather Georgiana and your own children see you as a cold, withdrawn man who did his duty by other peoples' standards? Or a warm, generous man who defied society's ridiculous strictures because he dared to be happy with a worthy woman?"

Darcy rubbed his hands over his face. His cousin made it sound so easy when it was anything but. "You are right. No worthier woman have I met than Elizabeth. Therein lies the difficulty. She knows me — sometimes I think she knows me better than I know myself. She will think I am offering for her out of duty."

"Then convince her that she is your choice!"

Again, easier said than done. "If only she understood my struggle. The obstacles—"

"For God's sake, do not mention those, Darcy. What you consider a mere obstacle to overcome would be an insult to her and her family — things she is powerless to change."

Darcy felt the blood drain from his face. "You are right."

Pointing his finger at him, Richard said, "Remember that."

"Remember what?"

"That is the second time in this conversation you have admitted that I am right."

If Darcy had not already returned the flask, he would have chucked it at his cousin's head. Instead, he smiled. Then he laughed. Then he groaned when he realized who was responsible for encouraging him to cede to his lighter side.

Elizabeth. How quickly and thoroughly she had turned his life on its head.

How could he convince Elizabeth of the depth of his devotion?

Would it be enough to inspire her to love him in return?

## Chapter 29

Caroline glared at her sister, repeating herself, "I simply do not know, Louisa. I left Duchess comfortably settled with a meat bone in the kitchen. Some irresponsible maid must have left the door open."

"The kitchen *and* the door to the ice house? Did you not oversee hiring the help yourself, Caro? How could you allow our brother to employ someone so thoughtless?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Caroline turned away. The less she said, the better. Louisa was too distracted with Duchess' well-being to probe too much, and she never had been as bright as Caroline herself was.

Louisa clutched Duchess in her arms, squishing her cheek against the dog's matted fur. "I will give you a bath, darling, then you can select one of the pretty bows those lovely Bennet girls made for you."

Caroline rolled her eyes and retreated to her rooms, unable to endure her traitorous sister and her stupid dog.

Images of Mr. Darcy with that impertinent Miss Eliza gnawed at her bones. This had been her opportunity to impress Mr. Darcy. Everything had been going perfectly as planned until that hoyden with muddy hems had invaded their lives.

She was supposed to be gone for Duchess' search. If only their carriage had arrived when Caroline had calculated. She ought to have known those dreadful Bennets would drag their feet until the last. She would not be surprised if Miss Eliza's firm resolve to depart was merely an act to inspire her brother to press them to stay. It had already worked once. Five days for a measly twisted ankle? Bah! Caroline would have healed in half of the time.

Looking through her window to the courtyard below, she saw the Bennet carriage. If they dallied any more, weeds would grow around the wheels. Caroline huffed. She could not look at Miss Eliza or her sickeningly sweet sister without wanting to scream and pull at their hair.

Well, if they were not good enough to leave, Caroline would.

She could not bear another moment at Netherfield Park with those people.

She would go for a ride. Somewhere away from Netherfield and Longbourn. Yes, that was the thing.

Undesirous of her sister's company, she imposed upon her maid, who cowered silently, brushing a gown in a corner, to accompany her. Caroline was not a country hoyden who tramped about without a chaperone. She was a proper lady who exercised perfect decorum and would do an estate so grand as Pemberley proud.

Donning her riding habit, a flattering dark blue velvet over high collars and a cinched waist and topped with an angled hat boasting a towering peacock's feather, she went out to the stables. Together with her maid and groom, she rode away from Netherfield Park. So proper.

She looked over her shoulder before the windows of Netherfield disappeared around the corner. Was Mr. Darcy watching her? Did he see how proper she was? How perfect for him?

A bitter taste filled her mouth. She might as well have been invisible for all the attention Mr. Darcy had paid her since Miss Eliza imposed on them. Nothing Caroline did had worked.

At the dinner which was supposed to reveal the Bennet family's vulgarity, they had been on their best behavior (still atrocious and appallingly unfashionable, but within the borders of acceptability). Mr. Darcy had even praised Mrs. Bennet's plum cake! At Caroline's table! And his frequent glances at Miss Eliza.... Caroline's stomach twisted.

Could he not see how well-matched they were? How similar? Caroline had molded her character to suit him, believing that the surest way to secure his heart was through flattery and imitation. Now she was not so certain.

Miss Eliza seemed to be his — and therefore, Caroline's — polar opposite. Where they were serious, she laughed. Where they excelled, she fell woefully short. In every way and on every level, Caroline ought to have risen far above Mr. Darcy's estimation of the country bumpkin.

If only she could make Darcy see how unsuitable Miss Eliza and her family were, then he could not fail to appreciate Caroline as she deserved. A shiver shook through her, filled with pure spite. She hated Miss Eliza as much as she loathed Duchess.

Miss Eliza was a clever one. She had been so insistent that they



keep her compromise secret — a scheme to make herself more desirable to Mr. Darcy and make Caroline look bad, no doubt. Caroline would eat her hat feather if Miss Eliza did not spread the story by the end of the week. If she played her advantage, her engagement would be announced then, too.

Well, Caroline was clever too. She would *not* lose Pemberley to a splendidly unsuitable nobody like Eliza Bennet.

She felt better by the time her mare's hooves clopped onto the first cobblestones marking Meryton's square. So eager had Caroline been to leave Netherfield Park, so ponderous had her thoughts been, she had given little thought to what she would do once she arrived at Meryton. She did not enjoy anybody's society there, and the shops were sorely lacking, compared to what she was accustomed to in town.

Only the soldiers added color and variety to the dull landscape. Red militia coats surrounded by gray clouds and brown mud.

She was about to resign herself to a dull hour inspecting the sorry fabrics and drab ribbons at the haberdashers when she stopped short. A gentleman walked out of the tavern, laughing with two other regimental officers. Dark, wavy hair, and a roguish smile topping a coat of the latest cut in fashion. He stood in the center of his group, the center of their attention, confident in his charm, certain of himself.

George Wickham. Caroline would know him anywhere. He was the sort of gentleman to draw eyes and approval, though she knew he was an unscrupulous scoundrel.

There was some bad blood between him and Mr. Darcy. Caroline did not know the details, though she had pressed Charles for them. But she had heard enough about him to know that anyone who willingly associated with the rogue was *persona non grata* to Mr. Darcy.

Her gaze lingered on Mr. Wickham, an idea tickling the back of her mind. It struck her that he was just the sort of man who might serve her purpose.

Instructing her maid and groom to have her horse's shoes looked at while she saw to a brief matter, Caroline crossed the street.

Mr. Wickham noticed her. He bowed gallantly, swooping his hat from his head.

She inclined her chin in acknowledgment. "Mr. Wickham. I believe the last time our paths crossed was at Pemberley."

"Years ago. Much too long." He took in her ensemble from top to bottom. "You are looking well."

She thrilled at the way his eyes raked over her, but she would not allow him any impertinent liberties. Her sights were set on a much bigger prize. "It is about Pemberley that I wish to speak with you."

Mr. Wickham's companions slipped away, and he extended his arm.

Caroline did not accept it. Instead, she turned down the mostly dry lane leading to the farrier, where her groom and maid would be.

He took the hint and fell in beside her. "I am intrigued by your mention of Pemberley. You know I am no longer welcome there." He took a deep breath as if to explain, to which Caroline raised her hand.

"I have neither the time nor the interest in hearing your sob story, Mr. Wickham. You have a talent I seek, and I have money you need. Perhaps we can be of mutual benefit to each other."

His bitter chuckle encouraged her to continue. "Are you aware that Mr. Darcy is currently my brother's guest at Netherfield Park?"

Mr. Wickham sucked in a breath. "Now, that is most unfortunate."

"Not necessarily. You see, his attention is much occupied by a young lady from whom I wish him to separate."

Mr. Wickham looked askance at her, a sly grin twisting his mouth. "Too much competition for you?"

"She is unfit to be the mistress of Pemberley," she said through clenched teeth.

He stopped, turning to face her. "What do you wish from me? Darcy will not take my presence here lightly. Nor am I desirous of crossing paths with him."

They were near the farrier's now, and Caroline did not want to get caught in Mr. Wickham's company any longer than absolutely necessary. "I want you to compromise Elizabeth Bennet. To do what you do best and ruin her."

He leaned closer to her, and it was all Caroline could do not to lean back. But she would not budge or negotiate. He opened his mouth, his breath reeking of drink. "If she is Darcy's choice, I would not touch her with a ten-foot pole."

Every muscle in Caroline's body tensed. Even her voice sounded

strained in her own ears. "There must be something you can do to help me separate them. If not ruin, then by some other means."

He narrowed his eyes, and with a sly smile, resumed walking. "I can think of something. How much do you offer me for my services?"

Caroline swallowed hard. "Fifteen pounds."

"Thirty."

She saw the greed in his eyes, the avarice, the need. Pursing her lips, she said, "Twenty, and not a pound more." She would send a footman to the barracks, saying it was an errand on behalf of her brother. She dared not risk being seen in Mr. Wickham's company again. More confidently, she added, "Accept my offer now or I will find another solution and keep my twenty pounds."

Oh, the stories Charles had told their father when they thought she was not listening. But Caroline always listened. And she knew when Mr. Wickham agreed to her terms that the conclusions she had drawn about his character and situation were spot on.

Miss Eliza was as good as dead to Mr. Darcy.



\* \* \*

Feeling smug, Caroline stepped into Netherfield's entrance hall. The Bennets were gone from her sight, and soon, Mr. Darcy would not be able to look at his precious Miss Eliza without a sense of loathing.

She asked her maid to prepare a bath. It had been a busy morning, and while she was pleased with the results of her activities, her skin still crawled from her contact with Mr. Wickham.

Her brother met her on the landing. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "I went for a ride." She tried to step past him, but

he blocked her path. "Out of my way, Charles."

He ran his hands through his hair, his nostrils flared, and his cheeks reddened. "I have already spoken with Mr. Hurst and Louisa, and now I will speak to you. You are to depart with them for London this same afternoon."

Caroline waved him off. "Do not be foolish, Charles."

He stood squarely in front of her, taking up a great deal of space. More than she had thought possible. "I am serious, Caroline. You leave today."

A squeak escaped her lips. Her brother had never been so firm with her before.

"Furthermore," he added, "you will no longer be included in any of my interactions with the Darcys."

"You cannot be serious," she said, though she strongly suspected he was more serious than he had ever been. Flippantly, she added, "What happened in the library was a big misunderstanding. Louisa was in despair over her dog. Her word cannot be trusted."

"You would have me trust your word over Louisa and Mr. Darcy when I have seen with my own eyes how conniving your behavior can be? Can you so easily pass the blame for your game of forfeit? Will you try to convince me it was all Louisa's idea? That she is to blame?"

She could not very well say it when he already had. Trying another tactic, she pooched her lip into a pout. "You are not being fair to me, Charles."

"Oh, I suppose you are the victim, then? That we have all conspired to make you look bad?"

He took the words from her mouth. She stared at him in befuddlement. What had happened to her meek, malleable brother?

His voice dropped, a steeliness in his tone she had never before heard. "I have already instructed the household to prepare for your departure. It is done. You are not welcome in my home until you learn to treat others as a lady ought to — with grace, dignity, and kindness."

That was too much. Clenching her fists, she snapped, "I suppose you would have me act like the Bennets!"

"I would never ask you to attempt the impossible."

She gasped at her brother's cut. She was ten times — a hundred times — more ladylike than all those females who had plagued her with their company combined.

With a huff, she pushed past her brother. At least she could trust Mr. Wickham to separate that odious chit from Mr. Darcy while Caroline returned to civilization and her sister's comfortable Mayfair townhouse. She would bide her time. With Miss Eliza out of the way, Mr. Darcy would come to his senses.

Then, it was only a matter of time before he would make an offer for Caroline's hand. She looked down at her fingers, wondering how big the diamond would be on her wedding ring.

## Chapter 30

From the moment they crossed Longbourn's threshold, Elizabeth stuck to Jane's side like a bur. That her sister should spend five days and nights under the same roof with Mr. Bingley and not come out engaged was a mystery their mother could not comprehend. She pelted both of them with questions, for she was equally disappointed in Elizabeth for failing to secure Mr. Darcy or Colonel Fitzwilliam, or whichever other unmarried gentleman happened to be about. Mama was not particular.

Jane felt their mother's disappointment, and between warding off Mama's more unfortunate comments and consoling her blameless sister, Elizabeth was exhausted by the end of an hour.

Thus it was with great relief that Elizabeth received Aunt Philips' invitation to a small card party that same afternoon. No doubt, she wished to hear what news proceeded from Netherfield Park. She would be as disappointed as Mama, but the two could commiserate with each other. And the opportunity to meet some of the newly arrived officers would supply further consolation for the pair. What Jane and Elizabeth had not accomplished at Netherfield would perhaps meet with greater success with a handsome, uniformed officer.

Elizabeth cared not for their plans, but she welcomed the distraction. Anything to get her mind off Fitzwilliam Darcy.

The prospect was too tempting for Mama to ignore, and she called for the carriage to be readied so that Jane would not strain her newly mended ankle. It would do her daughters no good at all to risk an injury from which they would have to recover at home, without the advantage of unattached male company. Elizabeth had no doubt that if a gentleman did find himself a guest in their house, Mama would trip any one of her daughters herself.

Having made several trips into Meryton, Elizabeth recognized most of the faces scattered in clusters inside Aunt Philips' parlor, but she did notice a newcomer. Dark, wavy hair and a winning smile turned to them when they greeted their aunt.

He was a handsome man, and he seemed well aware of the fact.

Mr. George Wickham was his name. His humor and charm soon won Elizabeth over, and when he mentioned that he had grown up at Pemberley with the Darcys, she became more eager to converse with him.

He deftly invited his friends into their conversation, then smoothly extracted Elizabeth to the side where they could speak with a measure of privacy. It was easy for her to dismiss his impropriety in seeking her out on so sudden an acquaintance when she was curious to learn how Fitzwilliam had been as a child.

Before she began her questioning, she said politely, "I hope you are finding Meryton satisfactory, Mr. Wickham."

"The two days I have spent here have been a delight."

"Really?" She could not account for his enthusiasm but thought more kindly of him for it. "Soldiers travel a great deal. Others might find us deficient compared to your other posts."

"I find the company captivating." He looked at her intently, in a way which would have made her blush a month ago. As it stood, she wondered why he would imply such a compliment when he hardly knew her. It made her uneasy.

He looked away, having enough decency to look uncomfortable. "I apologize, Miss Elizabeth. I have so long been forced to rely upon my charms to move up in this unforgiving world, I failed to behave as a gentleman ought to a gentleman's daughter. It is plain to me that you are too clever not to see through supercilious compliments. Pray, forgive me."

His honesty was refreshing. She smiled. "Do not concern yourself, Mr. Wickham. Far be it from me to be offended by a well-meant, if undeserved, compliment."

"Thank you for your understanding. Too many are swayed by wealth and prominence"—a hint of bitterness infused his words—"when they ought to measure a man by his character."

She could not agree more, and she was curious to know who had gained the advantage over Mr. Wickham with his wealth and privilege. "First appearances are often deceiving. It takes conversation and observation of a person's actions — things which require time — to determine a character with any accuracy." *My, how she sounded like Charlotte!* Elizabeth held back a chuckle.

Mr. Wickham grinned, leaning back against his chair. "I see I shall have to mind what proceeds from my mouth if you are to judge me on it. Tell me, Miss Elizabeth, how am I faring thus far?"

She arched her brow. Perhaps she could extract some information from him after all. He seemed more than willing to continue this line of conversation. "That remains to be seen, Mr. Wickham. Up to now, you have said little and spoken nothing of significance."

He chuckled, then, taking her meaning, leaned closer. "Then I had better tell you something of significance lest you find my company lacking." He looked about, dropping his voice. "I understand that Mr. Darcy is currently residing at a nearby estate?"

Finally! The topic she sought, and so easily accomplished. "Yes," she replied, pleased at her indifferent tone. "He has been Mr. Bingley's guest this past month, at least. Were you and Mr. Darcy close?"

He nodded sadly, the frown at odds with his features. "As I mentioned before, I grew up at his estate, Pemberley. My father was his father's steward. Mr. Darcy was my godfather, and he generously gave me every advantage he gave his own son. He was a good man, and Darcy and I were the closest of friends."

Mr. Darcy's death explained his sadness. It would have been a painful loss for Mr. Wickham if he was as close to the gentleman and Fitzwilliam as he claimed.

Without any encouragement from her, Mr. Wickham continued, "Mr. Darcy arranged for my education along with a living as a clergyman on the estate's parish."

Elizabeth bit her tongue. She tried to imagine the charming flirt beside her dressed in a somber clergyman's collar and black coat. He would have attracted sizable crowds to his sermons, composed mostly of women, but would he have had anything worth saying? With Mary as a sister, Elizabeth was well-versed in the topics to which the pious were drawn ... and she had yet to witness an inkling of the same religious inclination in Mr. Wickham.

"As close as I was to Mr. Darcy, as close as his own son, you can imagine how betrayed I felt when his son refused to honor the living I had been promised. He gave it to another, leaving me with no prospects and no means to improve my position."

Elizabeth swallowed her gasp. Which was more shocking: the idea of a flirtatious soldier preaching morals or the suggestion that Fitzwilliam had not honored his father's will? She found it impossible to believe either. And while she would reserve judgment on Mr. Wickham's ecclesiastical aspirations, she knew Fitzwilliam.



He was a man of his word, a man of honor.

She looked askance at Mr. Wickham. He rubbed his hand over his face and sniffed back the tears clouding his eyes. That he believed his story was apparent, but she could not. Nor could she overlook his slanderous, incendiary claim against Fitzwilliam.

Like a cat batting at a ball of yarn, she began unraveling his story of woe. "That must have been a devastating blow."

He nodded. "It was. And now, I am nothing but a poor foot soldier determined to defend my countrymen from the threat of the French."

Had he wanted to be a war hero, he ought to have joined the regulars rather than the militia. Elizabeth shook her head, careful to keep her expression neutral. Here, sitting beside her was precisely the sort of man Charlotte had declared to be a danger to her — poor, charming, a victim of society — and Elizabeth found she could not spare him a grain of pity. He did not deserve it. "You say Mr. Darcy deprived you of your inheritance. Pray forgive me for prying, but has he wronged you in any other way?"

He was eager to smear Fitzwilliam's name. "My woes are nothing in comparison to those of others. He is a harsh tyrant." His eyes softened and he dropped his head. "I was unable to save his sister from his cruelty."

Elizabeth bit her lips together, and allowed him to continue. "Miss Darcy is a sweet girl, as proud as her brother but without his resentful nature. She looked to me like a brother, and I tried to protect her, to encourage her to nurture more boldness. She depended on me too much, and Darcy could not bear it."

Elizabeth imagined not. She would not trust any of her sisters with Mr. Wickham. Who was to say what he had attempted with Miss Darcy.... She felt her eyes widen as one suspicion after another filled her brain. What had Mr. Wickham attempted to do to Georgiana? She clasped her hands in her lap and controlled her breath. Was he the reason Georgiana froze up every time the militia was mentioned? This man displayed no contrition, spewing Fitzwilliam's supposed faults. Would he do the same to Georgiana? Elizabeth could not allow it.

"Tell me, Miss Elizabeth, how has Mr. Darcy behaved since his arrival?" Mr. Wickham asked, looking so certain of her reply, Elizabeth took great pleasure in befuddling him.

"You would be hard-pressed to find anyone in Meryton to speak

unfavorably about Mr. Darcy. He is well-liked by all."

He flinched. But he was quick to recover with a chuckle. "That, I find difficult to believe."

"Not as impossible as I find your tale, Mr. Wickham. You would be wise not to mention the name Darcy here if your aim is to malign them. From the day of his arrival with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam — judging from your pallor, I see you know the gentleman ... very talented with a sword and a pistol, or so I hear — Mr. Darcy has won the respect and admiration of everyone in the village and its surrounding estates."

Mr. Wickham squirmed in his seat, his complexion as white as his starched collars. He gasped. "That is impossible. Darcy never gives a good impression."

Elizabeth stood. "Perhaps that is usually so, Mr. Wickham. But his true character is known here. Ask anyone, and they will tell you that Mr. Darcy is the kindest, most generous, most exemplary gentleman ever to dance at the assembly. And any of us will defend his name from the likes of you. Take care, sir. He has many friends."

Mr. Wickham rose, bowing stiffly. "While I am loath to put our *tête-à-tête* to an end, I remembered an urgent task requiring my immediate attention. My apologies." He slithered out of the room, out of Aunt Philips' house, like a slippery viper.

Good riddance.

Elizabeth felt Jane's eyes on her, inquiring. She shook her head. She would tell Jane every detail, but their aunt's parlor was not the place.

After several minutes of fidgeting, losing at cards, and provoking curious stares when she lost the thread of the conversation around the table, Elizabeth dismissed herself. She needed fresh air and a brisk walk.

The two miles between Meryton and Longbourn went by in a blink. Elizabeth stood at the edge of the lane leading to her house, the door visible, and considered continuing to Oakham Mount.

The front door opened, and Fitzwilliam emerged with Georgiana, both of them smiling and chattering.

He stopped short as soon as he saw Elizabeth. Doffing his hat, he fumbled it between his hands, looking adorably shy when he finally spoke. "I came to call on your father."

"My father?" Elizabeth gasped. Now, *that* she had not expected.

# Chapter 31

Darcy was tongue-tied. He had spent the last half an hour conversing with Mr. Bennet. He was a clever, well-read, reasonable man, whose favorable qualities, while not excusing his negligence, made them more palatable.

Elizabeth broke the silence. "You called on my father?"

He felt Georgiana's hand loop around his arm and squeeze in sisterly support. He shuffled, embarrassed. "We had hoped to see you, but Mr. Bennet explained that the household had gone into Meryton."

She visibly relaxed, a flush becoming her cheeks. "That is a relief. After what you have been through—"

Darcy might have overlooked the significance of her words had she not cut her sentence short, had the pink in her cheeks not deepened to a darker hue. "After what I have been through?" he asked.

Elizabeth hesitated to answer, failing to meet his eyes.

"Come, Miss Elizabeth, you may speak freely with me."

She took a deep breath, her shoulders rising. "I do not wish to bring up something which has caused you so much distress."

What he had been through. Something painful. Darcy glanced at his sister, his manners stiffening as his defenses rose. "I must insist," he said more sharply than he had intended. He tried to soften the edge. "What have you heard?"

Elizabeth looked up, her eyes searching his. "That you are recovering from a heartbreak."

Darcy felt the blood drain from his face. Who had known about Georgiana's near-elopement? His sister's grip on his arm tightened. He placed his hand over hers. "Who told you this?" he asked.

Elizabeth looked between them, her brows furrowing.

Georgiana whispered, "Oh, William, I am so sorry. It has happened as we feared."

Elizabeth's eyebrows pressed into a deep V. "Pardon me, but were *you* not recently jilted by a lady in town? Is that not why you came here?"

Darcy could hardly believe his ears. Georgiana gasped beside him, her grip loosening. Elizabeth knew nothing of his sister's narrow escape from ruin. He exhaled in a whoosh, a chuckle born from the deepest relief easing the tension in his limbs.

He offered Elizabeth his free arm. "If you are not fatigued, shall we stroll in the garden? It seems I have some explaining to do."

She hesitated, her cheeks in high color, her eyes bright.

He teased, "What a tragic figure I must have presented. Is all of Meryton under this misconception?"

She bit her lips together, as though she were biting back a retort. Still, she did not take his arm.

He explained, "Georgiana will confirm that it was Richard who recently suffered a disappointment, not me. His mother, the Countess of Matlock, appealed to me for help when her son fell into a melancholy. When Bingley suggested a sojourn into the countryside at his newly leased estate, I hesitated to agree. However, in recent weeks, I have come to appreciate the brilliance of Bingley's plan." He pushed his arm closer to her, certain of her acceptance.

She stepped away. "You were not in a melancholy? There was no reason for your behavior to have been altered? No justification?"

"Not at all." Darcy dropped his arm to his side. There was fire in Elizabeth's eye. Fierceness became her, but he did not understand what he had done to deserve her scorching look.

"How else am I to understand your haughty behavior the day you arrived? The day we first met?" Her voice was thin, tight.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "My behavior?" Well he remembered the events of that day. What he could not comprehend was why he was not allowed to be a touch cross with duck egg running down his face and neck.

She flailed her arms heavenward. "Even with duck egg running down your coat, you struck me as a proud man, unhappy to find himself in the humble countryside. Gossip from the village suggested that one of the recently arrived gentlemen from London had recently had his heart broken. After observing your struggle to behave as a proper gentleman ought to, I assumed that man was you."

He wished she would have asked, but propriety did not allow for such personal interrogations. That their friendship's foundation had been borne from pity grated against his wounded pride. Dropping

his voice, he asked, "Am I to understand that you would not have given me the benefit of the doubt had you not believed me to be the victim of another woman's injustice?"

Her lack of a reply was answer enough. How could she have misjudged him so poorly? Or had she? A sick fear twisted Darcy's gut, seizing his lungs and sending a cold numbness through him. He had been so certain he was a desirable catch, he had not thought that a woman worth catching would require more from him. Elizabeth pushed him; she challenged him.

He had two choices: he could take offense or make reparation. Offense might soothe his pride, offering an easy, tempting solution. But he would risk losing Elizabeth's friendship. Worse, he would prove her claim true and lower himself in her estimation, something he could not bear to do. "I apologize for my ill-humor that day. I did not deserve your sympathy. However, I cannot regret the circumstances which led you to extend your sympathy to me. I pray I have not given you reason to doubt my true character on further acquaintance. I am well aware of my ability to give a poor first impression, not being blessed with an abundance of charm."

"You are charming enough when you want to be." The confusion in her face warred with the sharpness of her tone. "There is more. My aunt Philips invited us to call on her so that she might become acquainted with some of the newly arrived officers in the village."

Darcy went rigid as Elizabeth continued, "I met a gentleman who cast some grave accusations against your character."

Dread gripped Darcy. Georgiana leaned against him. He could not look away from Elizabeth.

Her gaze bore into his. "I defended you, certain you are nothing like the man he described."

There were few men who dared speak against him, and only one foolish enough to spout his venom to garner support. "Wickham." He raised his fingers, pressing against the pounding at his temples.

Softly, tremulously, Georgiana asked, "Mr. Wickham is stationed at Meryton?"

All hint of anger dissipated from Elizabeth's semblance. Quickly and efficiently, she relayed the details of her conversation with him to them, saying in conclusion, "I am sorry to have caused you distress, but if he confided his tale to me, so recent an acquaintance, I can only imagine the damage he could do to your reputation given enough time and influence." Her gaze shifted to Darcy. "His

manners were, at first, charming."

"But you were not fooled."

"I know you."

Darcy's heart felt so full, it might burst.

"Or, so I thought. I do not know what to think."

It broke Darcy to hear her uncertainty. He who prided himself in his stability, his trustworthiness.

Georgiana dabbed her eyes. "It has been long enough, I thought I would not be so affected by his presence. I had determined not to allow him to bother me, but I find myself quite shaken." She regarded Elizabeth as though she would explain everything to her friend, to spill her darkest secret — the secret which could ruin her.

Darcy murmured, "You do not have to say anything, Georgie."

"I know it."

Elizabeth reached out, taking Georgiana's hand. "You owe me no explanation, and I would rather not cause you more distress than I already have. Pray forgive me."

Georgiana smiled gently. "I trust you. I have been holding this inside me too long, festering."

"Only if you are certain. I would never betray your confidence, but neither will I encourage it unless you are certain you trust me to share your burden."

Georgiana needed no further reassurances. Jutting out her jaw, displaying her firm determination, she began, "Last summer, I convinced William to let a house for me at the coast. At Ramsgate..." Her words faded into the background as Darcy watched Elizabeth's reaction. She gasped when Georgiana described the attentions Wickham had lavished upon her when she was barely more than a child. The clench of her jaw when Georgiana spoke of how smoothly he had tricked her into believing he loved her. How he had persuaded her to elope with him. Her deep exhale when Georgiana described her heartbreak when they were found out — her relief at not having to harbor such a dreadful secret against her own brother and cousin....

Looking up at him, Georgiana continued, "You were not entirely wrong about my brother, Elizabeth. He has never said as much, but I know I broke his heart that day worse than Wickham had broken mine. Wickham betrayed his friendship, but I had repaid all of William's kindness and care toward me, his closest relative, by betraying his trust."

Darcy turned to his little sister, wrapping his arms around her and whispering into her hair, "No, Georgie. The blame is mine. I ought to have seen his plan earlier. I should have protected you better. You were a victim of Wickham's treachery, one of many others."

She pushed against him, sniffing and straightening her shoulders. Lifting her chin, she said defiantly, "I do not like being a victim. And I refuse to be a victim of his anymore."

Darcy froze, stunned with her resemblance to their own mother. Such firm grace she possessed.

"I cannot live scared all my life, shying away from problems and relying on my guardians to address them for me. That is not fair to you, and it does not serve me well at all when all I have wanted is to make you proud. To be like our mother as you have described her to me. She would never allow others to trample over her."

A lump swelled in Darcy's throat. He tried to swallow it down, to offer his sister his support, or at least, to tell her how proud he was of her. But he could hardly breathe, much less speak.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Georgiana said, "It is time to face my greatest fear." She turned to Elizabeth, the dear girl vulnerably searching her friend's face.

Darcy knew Elizabeth well enough to know she would not think any less of Georgiana. If anything, his sister had forever earned her full sympathy. As he once had.

Darcy sighed under his breath. "I ought to have run him through when I had the chance."

"Why did you not?" Elizabeth snapped. "If a man behaved in such a dreadful, predatory fashion toward any of my sisters, he would deserve no kinder treatment."

With one look, Darcy knew he was once again in her sympathies. She understood the truth of his heartbreak, though it did not, he accepted, justify his inflated estimation of his own importance. His sadness deepened at the reminder.

Georgiana spoke, interrupting his thoughts. "From what Wickham was willing to reveal to you, I am convinced he will continue to abuse my brother through me so long as he considers that he has an advantage over us. I cannot allow it. I must put an end to his manipulations."

Elizabeth embraced her. "You are very brave, indeed! Never underestimate yourself."

Georgiana closed her eyes and smiled. "My brother always tells me the same, but until now, I always felt he was exaggerating."

Elizabeth laughed, pulling away to hold Georgiana at arm's length. "Mr. Darcy never exaggerates, nor is he guilty of saying anything unless he truly means it."

If she knew him so well, why had she doubted him? Darcy could not bring himself to laugh. He loved her so much. A thousand times over, he would choose Elizabeth. Only Elizabeth. But there was a question he had to know the answer to before he yielded his heart to her completely. "If Wickham would have come to you with his sob story before we had a chance to further our acquaintance, would you have believed him?" He swallowed hard. "Would you have believed me capable of such cruelty?"

She pursed her lips and looked down at the ground ... where his heart now lay at her feet, trampled and bruised. Still, he gave her time. Until it became obvious she could not refute his fear. Elizabeth would not lie.

Holding out his arm for Georgiana, he turned down the road and began walking away.

Miss Lucas and Richard walked in their direction. Darcy nodded and continued. He did not stop. He could not.

Richard must have realized something was amiss. He soon fell in beside them. He and Georgiana spoke in hushed tones, but Darcy heard nothing over the pounding of his own heart beating and breaking.



## Chapter 32

Elizabeth watched Fitzwilliam's figure retreat down the lane, getting smaller as Charlotte approached. "What happened?" Charlotte asked.

"I hardly knew myself until this moment. He was right. As much as I wish to deny it, he was right." Elizabeth pulled her gaze from Fitzwilliam to focus on her dear friend. "You were right, too. About me. I thought I was restoring balance by favoring those treated unjustly, but now I see how it could so easily have motivated me to treat a good man unfairly."

Charlotte looped her arm through Elizabeth's, and pulled her to the garden. "I trust this means that you learned the truth: Mr. Darcy was not, nor has he ever been, jilted by a lady."

"If only I had known earlier."

"Let me remind you that it was your own assumption which convinced you he was heartbroken."

Elizabeth groaned. "Well do I know it."

"And has not Mr. Darcy earned your good opinion since — by his own merits and without the influence of your mistaken views?"

Elizabeth twisted her lips. She had no defense at all. She never would have given Fitzwilliam a fair chance had it not been for her misunderstanding. Any attempt to justify her prejudice would only make her feel pettier than she already did. "I have been a fool, Charlotte."

Charlotte squeezed her arm tighter to her side. "We are all fools in love."

Another groan. "Is it so obvious?"

Her friend looked at her as though that were the stupidest question ever to be asked.

Fitzwilliam was everything Elizabeth had been so proud of herself not to pursue — prominent, wealthy, connected — and she loved him dearly. More than she had believed herself capable.

But, just now, she had disappointed him deeply. What did he think of her now? For a certainty, she must have slipped in his admiration. It was an unbearable thought.

She stamped her fears down and focused, instead, on her friend who walked silently beside her, a smile flattering her features. A stab of guilt coursed through Elizabeth. Just because she was miserable and unhappy did not mean she should neglect her friend.

"Tell me, Charlotte, has love made you do anything foolish? Or are you as rational and practical as ever?"

Charlotte laughed. "Is it so obvious?"

It was as much of an admission of love as Charlotte was likely to make.

"Has the colonel declared his intentions, then?"

"He has. My father is beside himself — his own daughter, the one he feared was doomed to the shelf, being courted by the son of an earl. I can hardly believe my good fortune either."

Elizabeth listened as Charlotte described the qualities she most admired in Colonel Fitzwilliam, about his surprise inheritance and the comfortable estate she hoped one day to manage with him, about his failed courtship with a young lady whom he could not now recall why he had ever fancied, about his frequent calls at Lucas Lodge.... Charlotte had blossomed under his attention, and Elizabeth saw her friend with new eyes. Mama had always called Charlotte "plain," but she would not say that if she could see her now.

Clasping Charlotte's hands, Elizabeth said, "I am so happy for you both."

Charlotte's smile softened. "Do not cast Mr. Darcy aside because he is so unfortunate as to possess more wealth than you are inclined to approve of."

A chortle escaped Elizabeth. "Unfortunate, indeed! It is not the wealth I mind, Charlotte, but the attitudes which often accompany it. I will own that I am more upset at myself for being wrong than I am at him for being good."

"How sensible of you," Charlotte said with a wry grin.

"It would be stupid of me to hold such faults as wealth, good looks, and consequence against him."

"Only you could still consider such advantages faults."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "If I am to dwell on Mr. Darcy's faults, I suppose I ought to mention his frequent moody spells. But I find I cannot think of those without also remembering his rumbling laugh and his sense of humor."

"Which, incidentally, concurs frequently with yours."

"He understands me like no other."

Charlotte stopped. "Then what are you waiting for? There is little enough we can do to encourage a gentleman, but we can make it perfectly clear that such attentions are welcome."

Elizabeth feared she might not get the opportunity, though she vowed she would do everything within the realms of propriety — and a few things along the blurry edges — to do so.

# Chapter 33

By the time Longbourn was out of sight, Darcy had gained mastery over his mind (if not his heart). They were near Meryton now.

He patted Georgiana's hand. "Are you certain this is what you wish to do? It could expose you to society's censure."

She lifted her shoulders as though she did not care, but her breath shook, as did her voice when she spoke. "I am willing to risk their censure if it will save another innocent from falling prey to George Wickham." A few paces of silence. "It has been several weeks now that I wake every day grateful for what did *not* happen. How can I turn a blind eye to his machinations when we know very well that he will repeat them?"

Darcy pulled her into his arms, kissing the top of her head.

Richard tapped Darcy on the shoulder. "I cannot allow Darcy all the sentiment of this moment when my heart fairly bursts with pride." He held his arms open.

Georgiana laughed, her smile beaming as she went from Darcy's embrace into Richard's. Her anxiety was apparent — Darcy struggled to conceal his own — but she spoke freely and at ease with them. As the three of them continued into the village, Darcy could not help but compare the last time they had entered Meryton together in his coach with their infrequent, stilted conversation. What a difference time and new acquaintances made.



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Georgiana thought they would never find Wickham. She ought not to have been surprised to find him gambling at the inn when he was

supposed to be on duty.

She could tell he saw them the moment she, William, and Richard set foot inside the taproom. He was watching. She straightened her shoulders and kept her eyes forward.

William asked for a private room, and Richard sauntered over to Wickham's table, summoning him with a jerk of his head and the brief summons, "A word with you."

Georgiana followed William inside the private room, her every sense on the man following behind her.

She pressed her hands against her chest, trying to calm her heart before it leapt out of her skin. Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her hands together. *You must do this. You must.* Clasp ing her hands in front of her gently, as her mother always did in her portraits, Georgiana checked her posture and imagined every shake and quiver departing from her as she exhaled.

She spun around to face Wickham as Richard pushed him down into a chair. She waited for her heart to trip, for her breath to catch in her throat, for her palms to sweat ... something.

Wickham had inspired every emotion within her over the past few months, and looking down at him at that moment, Georgiana was stunned — in the most pleasant, freeing way imaginable — to feel absolutely nothing. Not one stir.

This glorious realization tempted her to smile, but she refrained. Wickham would assume her smile was intended for him, and she refused to feed his vanity.

Reminding herself that she was the granddaughter of a peer of the realm, the daughter of a lady born a viscountess, she did her best imitation of her aunt Catherine's imperious tone. "It has come to my attention that you are defaming my brother." She stared Wickham down, feeling her brother and cousin watching her as intensely as she watched Wickham for a reaction.

The smirk twisting his face did nothing to flatter his features. "I never thought I would see the day the great Fitzwilliam Darcy would hide behind a lady's skirt — and his little sister's at that."

Georgiana wondered what she had seen in him before. Was this how Richard now felt about Miss Honeyfield? The urge to slap Wickham across the face nearly overpowered her. She now understood how difficult it must have been for her brother to spare the wastrel when he had found them at Ramsgate. "At least my brother does not chase after schoolgirls as you do." Satisfied with

the snap in her tone, she continued, "Are you so inept at wooing a mature woman, you must resort to the young and inexperienced?"

Wickham did not look so smug now. Richard made strange sounds from his throat. William inhaled sharply, holding his breath.

Having begun, the floodgates opened, and denunciations poured off Georgiana's tongue with a fluency she did not know she possessed. "Since you have made it clear that you are unchanged and unworthy of our trust, you have left us with little choice but to proceed in accordance with your recent behavior. It is my decision — and in this, I have the full support of my two guardians — to make your history of debauchery known. We aim to speak to the merchants and families in and surrounding Meryton, as well as London."

At the mention of town, Wickham's head shot up. She had his full attention.

"Your wrongs against me, my family, and all of the people you have misled and defrauded will soon be known in all of England."

"You would ruin yourself to expose me?" He tried to appear smug, but Georgiana heard the anxiety in his voice.

Her heart was in her throat, but she kept her composure. Lifting her chin, she said, "I am not the granddaughter of an earl for nothing. Society knows when it is in their best interest to overlook a misstep which ended in no wrongdoing. A few dinner parties and balls, and I will soon be in their good grace again."

His jaw hardened. He knew she was right. As unfair as it was, her status protected her from lasting consequences. They would forgive her as soon as the next, bigger scandal arose (of which there were always many).

Narrowing his eyes, he said, "I do not believe you will do it."

She allowed herself to smile now. "That would be your mistake, for I assure you I am a lady of my word. I am a Darcy. And I will not hesitate to warn the wealthiest fathers of my acquaintance to keep their daughters away from the likes of you. I will sooner gain their gratitude than their disfavor."

He did not seem convinced, so she continued, "Once I reveal how you preyed upon me shortly after the death of my dear father, beginning while I was still in mourning, their wives will pity me and forgive my foolishness for so nearly falling victim to a loathsome, manipulative man. Any hope you hold of marrying into a fortune will be destroyed."

Wickham paled. "I will be ruined!"

Georgiana shrugged. "Then you ought to have behaved better."

He leaned forward, elbows against knees, head dropping into his hands. Defeated. Georgiana was nervous no more.

Taking a step to the curtain separating them from the other private rooms, she said, "If I ever hear of you speaking against me or my brother or anyone else I care about, we will call in your debts. You can live the remainder of your days at a Fleet Street prison. We are done with you, Wickham."

She stepped out of the room, the heavy boot steps of her brother and cousin following closely behind her through the taproom and out to the street where she continued until she rounded the corner.

Twirling around to make certain nobody observed her, she skipped and squealed. She felt invincible! Even better, she would sleep easier knowing she had done her best to protect her friends. Wickham was cut off at the knees, and she had been the one to strike the fatal blow to his greedy aspirations. She twirled in a circle, feeling lighter than she had in years. Feeling as though she could single handedly take on Napoleon's army.

William and Richard grinned at her, eyes brimming with approval.

Her pent-up energy now controllable, she thanked them. "I could not have done that without you. What is more, thanks to these past few weeks, men such as Wickham have no hold over me. You have both shown me what to look for in the gentleman I will eventually marry, and I will not settle for anything less."

Panic flashed in their eyes, making Georgiana giggle. "Fear not, noble guardians, I mean to wait another year before my coming out."

They heaved a unified sigh. Then, Richard asked, "What is it that you wish for, Georgie, when it is your time?"

"I wish to marry for love. Not the flattering sort based on infatuation and daydreams, but the real kind where a man and a woman understand each other with nothing more than a glance. Where they rejoice in each other's friendship and challenge each other to be a better rendition of themselves. Where happiness is not one-sided, with one always taking and the other giving, but mutual."

"You learned all of that with us?" Richard asked, his eyes on William.

Knowing what he was about, Georgiana looked demurely at her brother to reply. "Of course. Charlotte is your match as much as Elizabeth is William's. It is so obvious." She hoped her little plan to get Elizabeth to call again at Netherfield worked. The couch at Longbourn had so many cushions....



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Georgiana's certainty, her absolute confidence, shook Darcy to his boots. A gust of wind might have knocked him over.

As if Richard had not said enough already, he now added, "Does Georgie not remind you of your mother?"

Darcy nodded. It was all he could do.

Georgiana's spiritedness calmed, a hopeful smile spreading up to her eyes. "Really?"

Her summer blue eyes took him in, and for a flash of a second, he was standing over her crib, watching over her as she cooed at him with wide, trusting eyes. He had promised to keep her safe, to love her unconditionally. Her skin had been so delicate, he was afraid to touch her, but she had grabbed his finger and held it so tightly, he had not been able to extract himself from her firm grip until she fell asleep. And though she had finally released her hold on his fingers, her hold on his heart remained strong. "Our mother would be proud of the young woman you have become. I am. If you were not already my sister, I would wish for you to be."

He wiped a tear trickling down her cheek.

Straightening her shoulders and smiling saucily, she laughed. "Good, for I would not trade you for anyone."

Darcy caught Richard dabbing at his face. "Too much sentiment makes my eyes leak." Another few dabs. "We have a lot to do if we are to make good on our threats. I will speak with Colonel Forster. Wickham's debts are enough to condemn him." To Georgiana, he



said, "And he has been free enough with his affections to warn others of his roguish ways without mentioning you."

She nodded, an image of mature composure. "I would prefer to keep my mistake quiet, for reasons you both understand. But if I must speak to protect another lady from falling under his spell, I will not hesitate to do so."

Darcy nodded. "Only if it becomes necessary. I will inform the shop owners."

Looping her arm through his, she said, "And I will accompany you."



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Darcy thought Richard would have beaten them to Netherfield, but the butler assured him that the colonel had not yet returned.

"I hope he did not run into trouble," Georgiana said.

When he noticed Bingley rushing down the steps toward them, Darcy braced himself.

"Darcy, I am beside myself, and I owe you a thousand apologies. Louisa is not well. It happened at breakfast. She took ill right at the table. Her maid went into Meryton to fetch a nerve tonic. The apothecary is to come, and Louisa is currently sleeping."

Resting his hand on Bingley's shoulder to still him, Darcy said, "You could hardly have expected them to travel while she is feeling poorly."

"But Caroline is still here."

"That is unfortunate, but it would not do for Mrs. Hurst to suffer needlessly when I can take rooms at the inn."

Bingley puffed up. "You will do no such thing! You are my guest." He deflated. "Of course, the choice is yours. I would never presume to make you stay. However, I have taken precautions. I charged one of the local scullery maids to follow Caroline, should

she retire from her rooms. And I have arranged for a footman to guard her door at night. There will be no compromises under my roof. You are like a brother to me, Darcy, but I would never wish that attachment on you."

"You are a good man, Bingley. We will stay." Thanks to his sister, he had several letters to write and would spend the better part of the afternoon ensconced in his room. Miss Bingley no longer had access to the keys. He would be quite safe.

After Bingley left them, Georgiana said, "I wonder what has delayed Richard's return from Meryton."

"He is probably prating and jawing with the officers."

Georgiana accepted his excuse, making Darcy believe it more. "It is good to see him acting like himself again." Clasp ing her hands together and biting her lip, she said, "I am sorry for committing you to writing so many letters."

Though he had had the same thought, he would not allow her to feel guilty. "I would write twice as many to see you stand up to Wickham again."

Her eyes gleamed. "I can hardly wait to tell Elizabeth!"

There was a great deal he wished to tell Elizabeth, too. But he could not leave before Richard returned. If he did not have so many letters to see to, he would have had a horse readied to ride back into Meryton. But his correspondence awaited him like an unforgiving mistress, and he knew that neither he nor Georgiana would be easy until those letters were sent.

# Chapter 34

Elizabeth looked at the mantel clock again. An hour had passed since Fitzwilliam had gone. An agonizingly slow hour.

Had Georgiana sent the devious Mr. Wickham scampering off with his tail tucked between his legs? Elizabeth would have liked to see it. Then, at least, she would know if they had returned to Netherfield by now. She doubted it. Fitzwilliam was too responsible to allow the local merchants to suffer any loss due to Mr. Wickham. He would not delay in warning them. Another hour then, maybe?

She checked the clock again.

The crunch of carriage wheels in front of Longbourn filled her with excitement until she realized it could not be Fitzwilliam. Still, it offered a welcome distraction.

As she crossed the parlor to look out of the window facing their drive, the front door flung open, her mother's sharp tone echoing from the entrance, "Where is she?"

A second later, Mama barged into the room, her hands fisted at her sides. The fierce look in her eyes felt like a slap, and Elizabeth stepped back.

Mother charged forward, seeming to grow larger in her ferocity. "What have you done?" she demanded.

Elizabeth was at a loss.

"We saw Mrs. Hurst's maid rushing up the street. Sensing something was amiss, I kept watch at my sister's window for her return. She traveled so quickly, I had great difficulty catching up with her to inquire after the residents of Netherfield."

An image of her mother running through the muddy streets after a maid made the corner of Elizabeth's lips twitch. Jane, who now stood with Papa behind their mother, saw and shook her head. Evidently, Elizabeth's still-unknown sin was grave, indeed.

Never one to keep a confidence or leave an accusation unsaid, Mama continued, "She said they were leaving for London this same afternoon!"

Elizabeth reached out to the nearest chair. "All of the household?"

"What did you do to chase Mr. Darcy away? He was a perfectly respectable gentleman, handsome and rich and a fine dancer. You could have settled quite comfortably with him, but you are determined to sabotage my efforts to see you married." Her voice trembled and her shoulders stooped. "You are intent on sending me to an early grave when all I have ever wanted for you is to marry well."

Jane rushed forward, gently guiding Mama to her chair by the fireplace, consoling her between their mother's wails lamenting her certain demise made more imminent due to Elizabeth's great failure.

Papa mumbled to Mrs. Hill, then took his seat beside Mama, taking her hand and stroking it between his own.

Elizabeth stood rooted in place, too heavy to move, too drained to try. Fitzwilliam was leaving. And without so much as a farewell. Tears pricked her eyes, and she sucked in her breath to hold them in.

Fitzwilliam had felt her misunderstanding of him deeply. With that and Mr. Wickham's arrival, she could not blame him for wanting to leave. As brave as Georgiana wished to be, he would never expose his sister to further harm.

It stabbed Elizabeth to the core that she thought even more highly of him for it.

Mrs. Hill came into the parlor bearing a tray of tea, cake, and several bottles of Mama's assorted tonics, draughts, salts, and infusions. The sight of them calmed Mama, and leaving her in Papa and Mrs. Hill's capable hands, Elizabeth pulled Jane upstairs to their bedchamber.

Closing the door, she spun around. "Is this true? Are they really leaving?"

"The maid did not say it implicitly, but that was what she gave us to understand."

Elizabeth collapsed onto her bed. Jane's arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"The girls remained behind to see what else they could discover. Mary watched over them like a sentinel. What did you tell her before you left? Whatever it was, she has been most diligent."

"Dearest Mary. I knew she would keep Lydia and Kitty away from that wicked Mr. Wickham."

"Lizzy! How can you say such a thing?"

Before Jane could attempt to justify an undeserving man, Elizabeth told her everything that had transpired since her conversation with the soldier in their aunt's card room. She left out most of Georgiana's story. Elizabeth would not presume to tell it without Georgiana's permission when there was enough to prove Mr. Wickham's poor behavior to Jane without mentioning her.

"And now, they are leaving," concluded Elizabeth, leaning into Jane.

"That wretched, wretched man!" Jane's spiteful exclamation shocked Elizabeth. She never disapproved of anybody. "I would give him the cut direct if he attempted to secure an introduction, and I will encourage our sisters to do the same."

A commotion downstairs alerted them to the arrival of their younger sisters, as did Lydia's shouts. "Lizzy? Oh, drat it all, where is Lizzy?"

"Vulgar expressions will not summon her any quicker than upright speech," Mary chastised.

Lydia hissed something Elizabeth could not hear to Mary — something unpleasant and, no doubt, exceedingly vulgar given Kitty's reaction.

"Watch your tongue, Lydia! Miss Darcy would not approve," said Kitty. "Are you willing to risk losing her friendship and the chance of an invitation to London over a few trifling words?"

Lydia quieted. As stubborn as she could be, she wanted an invitation to Darcy House more than she wanted to speak as she pleased.

Elizabeth straightened and smoothed her hair. "We should see what they found out." Maybe, just maybe, they would have learned that only the Hursts were leaving. *They could take Miss Bingley with them*, Elizabeth thought sardonically.

The girls were in the parlor with Mama by the time she and Jane reached the corridor. Papa's eyes glazed over as chatter surrounded him. Mary moved the cushions on the couch over to make room for them to sit.

Kitty saw Elizabeth first and, eager to be the first to share their news, said, "You will never guess what only just happened!"

At the same time, Lydia asked, "What did you say to that handsome officer, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth's skin prickled. Had Mr. Wickham done something drastic? Knowing she was not the only one to have words with him

made her more alert.

"The entire regiment is searching for him! It seems he has deserted," Kitty blurted.

Lydia elbowed her. "I was going to tell them that."

Rubbing her arm, looking triumphant, Kitty said, "Then it is too bad for you I beat you to it."

Lydia rolled her eyes, returning her attention to the story at hand. "We got it from Mr. Denny. He was greatly agitated, and since he is a particular friend of mine"—she glanced at Kitty, her nose in the air—"he told me that Colonel Forster had sent him to begin a search. Evidently, Mr. Wickham owes money to a few shopkeepers in the village already. Mr. Denny said little more, being in a great hurry as he was, but Mr. Wickham's debts must be great. Or they might have been called in by some unsavory collector. Whatever the case, I am inclined to think that while he is very handsome, he must also be a very bad man to desert his post so suddenly."

"That is very astute of you, Lydia," said Jane. "I think we would all do well to shun the likes of Mr. Wickham."

The room fell silent at Jane's reproof.

As shaken as she was at the Darcys sudden departure from Hertfordshire, Elizabeth was proud of Georgiana.

Once again, she checked the clock. If all of this had recently transpired, there was a good chance the Darcys had not yet departed from Netherfield. If she left soon, she might catch them before they did. "I wish I could think of an excuse to call at Netherfield," she mumbled to herself.

Mary shifted on the couch, pulling a reticule out from behind her. Holding it up, she asked, "Will this serve your purpose?"

Kitty gasped. "That is Miss Darcy's!"

Elizabeth grinned. Thanking Mary for her timely discovery, she took the reticule, let Mrs. Hill wrap her up, and set out for Netherfield Park at a brisk clip.

Her skirts were heavy from the damp grass, her boots coated with mud, by the time she reached the clean, gravel drive. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. There were no carriages waiting in the drive. No servants hustling about. Was she already too late?

Scraping her boots and shaking out her skirts, she walked up the steps to the front entrance. The butler opened the door, holding out his hands to take her bonnet, gloves, and coat. She was too nervous to ask if the family was in, but they must have been, for he

immediately showed her into the receiving parlor.

Standing to the side, he allowed her to pass. Clutching Georgiana's reticule, she entered.

And saw Fitzwilliam.

Elizabeth blinked, not trusting her sight. She blinked again, but he was still there, standing tall and proud in front of the fireplace. He turned, a smile spreading over his face as he closed the distance between them in three long strides.

She had never been so happy to see anyone in her life. Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam stood face to face, grinning at each other until she finally found her voice.

"I thought you had gone." A flicker in his eyes made her heart trip and flutter.

"You assume a great deal." The tenderness in his voice held no judgment.

She tried to temper her smile, but it was impossible. Fitzwilliam was here. She still had a chance.

# Chapter 35

Forgiveness suited Elizabeth, as did the smile gracing her lips, and Darcy refused to waste another breath resenting her error. If she could forgive his haughtiness, he would strive to prove her trust was not mislaid.

She leaned forward, her hands resting against his lapels. Darcy did not remember the moment his arms wrapped around her, but he gloried in the feel of Elizabeth in his embrace.

It was just he and Elizabeth and the faint scent of honeysuckle in her hair drawing him closer and closer until all he saw were the flecks of gold in her eyes and the curves of her lips. "I love you," he whispered, dropping his forehead to rest against hers.

She tilted her chin up, and he felt her breath against his lips. "That is what I came here to say."

"I said it first."

She smiled.

"I think I should call on your father today," he added.

"I think you had better," she teased.

He felt her fingers trace along his chin and up his cheeks. "Fitzwilliam?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you, too."

Words as sweet as Elizabeth's lips.



\* \* \*

Caroline froze in place, one hand steadying herself against the hall outside the parlor. The look in Mr. Darcy's eyes. The way he looked



at Miss Eliza. It left her breathless and filled her with a longing she had only ever felt the first time she had seen Pemberley. It told Caroline that it was time for her to withdraw.

Slowly, she stepped away from the opening and tiptoed to the stairs. She was stunned to realize how she mourned the loss of Pemberley more than the loss of the gentleman.

Charles met her at the top of the stairwell. "Caroline," he snapped, looking cross.

Caroline was too numb to talk with him. "I have a headache." She continued walking. If she could just make it to her rooms.

"Are you unwell?" He reached out to her elbow, his hold gentle.

She looked up at him, feeling like she was seeing her own brother for the first time. He always had been tender-hearted. While she had always considered Charles weak for it, his concern for her was balm to her heart. "No. Nothing a cup of tea cannot fix."

"Come, Caro, we must talk. We can have tea in my study."

Hurst was already there, pouring what looked to be his first glass of port given the fullness of the decanter. He poured another glass and handed it to Charles. "Mr. Jones seems to be a knowledgeable apothecary," he said.

Caroline sat by the fireplace, her brother soon joining her. "What does he suspect ails Louisa?" she asked.

Hurst smiled broadly. "Nothing which will not pass in a few months."

"A few months?" And he was happy about it? Caroline wanted to smack the man for her sister's sake.

"Nine months, to be precise," Hurst added, rolling up to his toes and taking a sip from his glass.

Caroline knew what that meant, and she tried to be pleased. Childbirth was a terrifying prospect, but she would pretend to be happy for Louisa and Hurst. She nodded and attempted a smile, but she was too full of whatever it was that seeing Mr. Darcy with Miss Eliza had made her feel to give any other emotion credit.

Thankfully, Charles congratulated Hurst enough for both of them. They decided that their party would depart for London at first light the following morning to allow for slower, more comfortable travel. Then Hurst left to write a message for their personal physician to meet them at their townhouse on the afternoon of their return.

It was too bad Louisa was not well enough to depart now.

Caroline had no desire to continue at Netherfield Park.

The housekeeper brought a tea tray up, and when the door had closed behind her, and Caroline had stirred two spoons of sugar into her cup, Charles spoke again. "My footman told me something alarming."

Caroline's breath hissed out of her. She felt deflated. None of her plans had worked. What had made her think paying Mr. Wickham to turn Miss Eliza against Mr. Darcy would meet with any success? She sighed deeply, and set her cup on the table. "What did he say?" she asked.

"He said that you gave him money to deliver to an officer, to Mr. Wickham of all people, on my behalf. You can imagine my shock! I would never lend that man money, knowing what I know about his history with Darcy's father and how he behaved at Cambridge."

Caroline was too weary to deny what she had done. She spilled the story, starting with Wickham and doubling back to the motive behind her dinner party, her game of forfeit, the sleeping draught Duchess had drunk from Mr. Darcy's cup, Duchess' kidnapping, and her attempt to compromise Mr. Darcy. The more she revealed, the lighter she felt, so, while she did not expound upon her errors, she expressed the pertinent details to the extent necessary.

It occurred to Caroline that had these events transpired to any other lady, she would have laughed and poked fun at the feast of failures. But she was unaccustomed to laughing at her own follies.

Shaking his head, Charles said, "You will have to tell Louisa ... eventually. Not when she is ill, of course. That would not do. Hurst would have my head for allowing you to upset her."

Caroline nodded. Revealing her mistakes once was quite enough for her.

"I would ask you to apologize to Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, but under the circumstances, I think you would do better to keep your distance."

She nodded again. She could not look at Mr. Darcy without remembering what she had done.

"What am I to do with you, Caroline?" Her brother shoved his hands through his hair.

Smoothing her skirts, she said, "Mr. Darcy is safe from me. I am determined when I have a purpose, but I have come to realize that I do not love him and must, therefore, find another purpose." She had intended to spare her pride, but as she spoke, she realized the truth

of her words.

Mr. Darcy represented everything she wanted: status, consequence, wealth, a fine estate, and all the advantages those things implied. To her, marriage was more of a business arrangement than a means for contentment. If she wanted happiness, she could purchase a new gown. What she wanted was to rise in the world, and for that she needed a certain sort of man who could lift her up.

None of this she explained to Charles. Her poor brother would never understand. He had lived his entire life with his heart while she lived with her head — vestiges of her family's heritage in trade, she supposed.

"I would like to see you happy, Caro," he said.

"Marry your sweet Jane, and leave me to my own happiness." She wished the charitable words unsaid as soon as she spoke them, but the shock on her brother's face was so satisfying, Caroline decided it was the perfect time to retreat to her rooms where she remained for the rest of the day on the pretext of overseeing the proper packing of her and Louisa's trunks.

Caroline was ready to leave before her traveling companions were the following morning. London beckoned to her soul, and she was eager to make an appointment with her dressmaker.

Duchess sat atop with the coachman. Their return to town was bound to be more agreeable than their departure to Hertfordshire had been.

They rolled out of the drive, leaving Netherfield Park behind them.

Hurst leaned back. "What do you plan to do now?" he asked her.

After her new gown, Caroline really had no idea.

He continued, "You have been after Mr. Darcy so long, you have ignored the large pool of suitors available to you."

"I always thought you would try for a husband with a title," Louisa said. She was pale, but she was as determined to get home as Caroline was.

A title. My lady. Lady Caroline. She could get accustomed to that.

"It is entirely possible," said Hurst. "Many families in the first circles need what you have to offer."

Money. Caroline shrugged. It was a fair exchange: her dowry for his status.

"You are still of an appropriate age, and you are handsome. Not to mention your many accomplishments," added Louisa.

Between Meryton and London, Caroline developed a new plan. She would secure a titled gentleman who would look at her the same way Mr. Darcy had looked at Miss Eliza. After all, if an unsuitable nobody with nothing to recommend her could snatch a gentleman like Mr. Darcy, then there was absolutely no reason why Caroline could not at least snare a marquess.

## Chapter 36

Darcy looked down at the dog sitting at his feet. Duchess had sat between him and Elizabeth for the entire wedding ceremony, gazing out over the assembled crowd, blinking and nodding as though she were accepting the honor of arranging that day's blessed event. "She seems to approve," he said.

"And well she should." Elizabeth teased the dog's ear, rising when her father approached.

Richard grinned, cradling his bride's hand close to his heart. "A guinea that I will hear Darcy's laughter from our carriage."

Bingley bunched his lips, considering. "He would have to laugh exceedingly loud. You are leading the way in the first carriage, are you not?"

Mr. Bennet's eyes loomed large through his spectacles. "Careful or Mary will hear you making wagers in church."

With a chuckle, Richard added, "Is it not also in the Scriptures that there is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving? I merely wish to add to Bingley's joy when he loses our little wager and has the privilege of bestowing upon me a guinea."

"How considerate of you, Colonel, but I could not be happier than I already am at this moment." Bingley beamed, lifting his wife's hand to his lips. "I have never known Darcy to give in to merriment as fully as you believe possible, but neither did I believe he would dance for hours at a public assembly, lose poorly at spillikins, or declare to my sister's dog before he professed his love to his future wife! I believe anything possible today."

"Beautifully said, my love. It is a day for miracles, is it not?" Mrs. Bingley's eyes brimmed with pride for her husband.

Mr. Bennet watched his daughters, handkerchief in hand to dab his eyes. "The conveyance is ready," he said with a crack in his voice. Composing himself with a sniff, he tucked his handkerchief into his pocket and rubbed his hands together. With a wink at Darcy, he returned to Mrs. Bennet.

"What is that about?" Darcy asked.

If his suspicions had not been piqued before, his wife's arched

brow and smile certainly did. "Let us not tarry. Mama is waiting to give you her wedding present when we arrive at Netherfield Park."

Darcy tingled all over. He knew he grinned like a little boy, but he could not help himself. "Her plum cake receipt? Let us waste no more time."

Richard and Charlotte led the procession out of the church to cheers, the *tinkle-thud* of tossed coins and the squeals of children racing to pick them up, marking their joy. The Bingleys' exit prompted the same reaction.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth askance. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Shall we?" she asked, curling her hand around his arm, her eyes brimming with that mischievous look he loved so much. He could hardly wait to see what she was up to.

He did not have long to wait.

Mr. Gillet's cart sat in front of the steps, festooned with ribbons, boughs, and flowers. He held Jemima, who quacked and flapped her feet and looked lovely with a bow tied around her neck. He held her out, saying, "Your wedding present, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy burst with merriment. He laughed so hard, his stomach hurt, and when he could breathe again, he turned to Lizzy. "You did this." It was neither a question nor an accusation.

Clarice brayed, and Duchess yipped her greetings to her old friend, who, to be honest, did not look at all happy to see the puppy.

Hurst picked Duchess up from behind, patting her head and speaking softly. "Not today."

Richard could have his guinea. Darcy would gladly surrender a coin to his cousin, and to Bingley too for not wagering against him. Still laughing, Darcy handed Elizabeth up to the box of the cart and hopped in after her. Coins were tossed and more cheers were raised. Taking the reins from Mr. Gillet, Darcy urged Clarice forward, and once they were on their way to Netherfield Park and their wedding feast, he leaned over to properly kiss his wife.

# Epilogue

## 3 years later...

Darcy stretched his travel-sore limbs and lifted the squirming basket from inside the carriage. He checked the contents and breathed a sigh of relief. The ribbon was still intact — and a good thing that was, for the short length he had struggled to tie into a bow was the last of it.

He resented the business which had kept him in London longer than the week he had anticipated. Pemberley was where Elizabeth was most happy, so that was where they resided most of the year. But the surprise and delight on their faces would make the delay worthwhile.

Mrs. Reynolds sent a footman to take the basket from him, but Darcy waved him off. "Where are they?" he asked.

The dear housekeeper pointed him to the nursery. He ought to have known. Elizabeth was an attentive mother. She spent most of her day with Frederick. He was two-years-old now, and he possessed the talent most boys his age had of always getting into mischief. He loved searching for creatures in the woods and bringing them inside the house for all of his family to admire. Darcy smiled at the memories. Frederick's nurse had not been so amused when he had put a toad in her armoire for safekeeping. Or the grasshoppers in her pillowcase.

The door was open, and Darcy paused to appreciate the scene. Elizabeth held Amelia in her arms by the window. She swayed and sang softly while their baby girl clutched one of Elizabeth's curls in her tiny fist, her long eyelashes splayed over her plump, pink cheeks, and her rosebud lips puffing out as she breathed against her mother's shoulder. Frederick pulled a carved boat across the carpet, making whooshing noises while peeking up to make sure he did not wake his sister. Darcy took in the sight, wishing to remember the moment in vivid detail. The sound of Elizabeth's cooing and Frederick's playing gripped Darcy's heart, pulling him closer.

"Dada! Dada home!" Frederick squealed, toddling to his feet and

wrapping his arms around his father's knees before Darcy had a chance to brace himself.

Amelia opened her eyes, chirping and smiling and reaching for him. Even recently awoken from sleep, her eyes were as lively as her mother's.

Hobbling into the nursery with Frederick atop his left foot, clinging to his side like a monkey, Darcy ruffled his son's hair and kissed his girls.

Carefully crouching to the ground, he set down the basket. The cause of his London delay, and the reason his return had taken longer than normal, yipped and scratched at the side of the basket, the bow he had carefully tied around her neck now in tatters.

Frederick's eyes doubled in size. "Puppy!" Jumping up and down, he reached inside and pulled out the fluffy, white troublemaker. She took to Frederick immediately, bathing his chin with her pink tongue and making him giggle.

Darcy stood. Elizabeth considered him with an arched brow. "So this was your urgent business?"

"Only part of it. When I learned Duchess had puppies, I asked Mrs. Hurst if she might be willing to part with one. She insisted I take my pick of the litter for you."

He glanced at Frederick and his newest playmate. They were engaged in a game of tug-of-war with what was left of the ribbon.

Darcy chuckled. "I thought she would make a calm companion, but after spending three days in a carriage with her, I am convinced I chose the most troublesome of the lot."

Elizabeth leaned against him, and Amelia launched herself into his arms. Holding her securely against his shoulder, he wrapped his other arm around his wife's waist.

She tilted her face up to him. "You have never been afraid of a little trouble."

"Thank goodness for that." He kissed her forehead. It had been easier to face the challenges society threw their way with Elizabeth at his side. Not only had she met every obstacle with grace and wit, she had won over most of her critics by the time they celebrated their first wedding anniversary. Granted, there would always be the miserable few who hoped they would fail. But Darcy did not bother himself over them any more than Elizabeth did.

Frederick let go of the ribbon, and the mischievous Maltese darted through the room, dragging her mangled prize triumphantly.



In the blink of an eye, Darcy was transported to Hertfordshire, and he was chasing Duchess over the muddy lane, trying to keep her out from under Clarice's hooves. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around him. "The spitting image of her mother." To their son, she asked, "What shall you name her, Freddie?"

Frederick stopped chasing to better think, a somber expression taking over his features as he pondered. It was the same look Elizabeth teased Darcy endlessly for.

"My Lady?" Elizabeth asked, grinning at Darcy.

"I am partial to Her Grace."

"Or Little Muffin ... Sugar Plum ... Sweet Angel..."

Darcy chuckled. "Do not forget Darling Cream Puff."

"How could I forget that one?" she laughed.

Shaking his head gravely and tapping his pudgy finger against his chin, Frederick finally said, "Crumpet."

Thus decided, he resumed chasing Crumpet through the nursery, and Darcy turned to Elizabeth to share the other news.

"Mrs. Hurst was pleased to inform me that her sister welcomed her first child — a son — into the world on the same day her husband's prized hounds produced their first litter of puppies."

"Oh, dear me! She will not like to share the attention with her husband's dogs."

"Then she ought to have married someone other than Baron Basset. He swore he would never marry unless he found a woman he loved more than his beloved hounds."

"Then I am happy for Caroline."

"Mrs. Hurst assured me she is content enough, though her house is full of animals."

"And a new baby! How delightful! Louisa will be happy that her two daughters have a cousin to play with."

For months, the mere mention of Caroline Bingley was enough to make Darcy cross. But Elizabeth had helped him to see the other side of the coin. After all, that lady had been, in large part, responsible for pushing him and Elizabeth so often together. It must have been terribly frustrating for her, and that was punishment enough as far as Elizabeth was concerned.

Wickham was another who suffered his just deserts. His regiment caught up with him attempting to board a ship for Australia. His punishment had been swift. Twenty lashes and a dishonorable discharge to debtor's prison.

"I can hardly wait for Frederick's cousins to join us in a fortnight. It will be a happy reunion with Bingley and Jane, Richard and Charlotte, Denny and Kitty. We can catch up on each other's news while the children play." She bit the corner of her lip. "Are you prepared for a month with the rest of my family?"

"If you can withstand my aunt Catherine, I see no reason why I should not exert myself to be a good host to them. Besides, with three of her five daughters settled, your mother has calmed considerably. Even Lydia has improved with you dangling a London season as a prize before her. And Mary's skill at the pianoforte has increased her confidence."

"I have Georgiana to thank for lending her music tutor to Mary during her stay with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner."

"As for your father, I do not suspect we shall see much of him once he finds the library."

"How could I ever believe you were haughty and taciturn?" She shook her head, her lips quirking. "Tell me, Fitzwilliam, do you regret attaching yourself to such an unsuitable nobody, with no dowry and no connections to recommend her?"

"Not for a moment," he replied. "I would choose you again in a heartbeat. What of you? Are you happy?" He knew the answer, but he always needed to hear her say it.

She snuggled against his chest. "Splendidly happy now that you are here where you belong."

There was no better place to be, with his daughter clinging to his arm, his son running and squealing about the room, and his wife at his side, the smell of her rosewater and the feel of her against him sending his heart racing. Just like that first day when they had met. With duck egg dripping down his face and a stubborn mule braying in the background. What had been mortifying was now one of Darcy's favorite memories. It was the moment he had first heard Elizabeth laugh, the beginning which had led him to his perfect match.

And to this perfectly splendid moment.



\* \* \*

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# Thank you!

Thank you for reading *A Splendidly (Un)suitable Match*! Of all the stories you could read, I'm honored you chose mine. I hope you enjoyed it, and I'd love to hear your thoughts in a review.

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# About the Author

When Jennifer isn't busy dreaming up new adventures for her favorite characters, she is learning Sign language, reading, baking (Cake is her one weakness!), or chasing her twins around the park (because ... cake).

She believes in happy endings, sweet romance, and plenty of mystery. She also believes there's enough angst on the news, so she keeps her stories light-hearted and full of hope.

While she claims Oregon as her home, she currently lives high in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador with her husband and two kids.





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